

**Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainable  
Development in Nigeria's Private Sector: Evidence  
from the Middle Belt Region**

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores how public perceptions are shaped and sustainable development advanced by corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices of private sector firms in Nigeria's Middle Belt. Using a community-centered approach, it investigates how social concerns, environmental responsibility, ethical behavior, community engagement, and the appropriateness of CSR initiatives affect perceptions of legitimacy and impact; anchored in Participatory Communication, CSR, and Stakeholder theories. A survey of 623 respondents in communities impacted by Dangote Cement PLC (DCP) and MTN Nigeria examined six latent constructs using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Results reveal that ethical concerns (DCP  $R^2 = 0.460$ ; MTN  $R^2 = 0.471$ ) and environmental concerns (DCP  $R^2 = 0.392$ ; MTN  $R^2 = 0.397$ ) were the strongest predictors of CSR perception, underscoring the importance of transparency, accountability, and ecological responsibility. Conversely, sustainable development ( $R^2 < 0.05$ ), social concerns (negative  $R^2$  values), community engagement ( $\sim 0.05$ ), and appropriateness of CSR (negative  $R^2$  values) showed weak or negligible influence, suggesting CSR initiatives are often poorly aligned with community priorities and development needs. Findings highlight that CSR in the region remains largely top-down and image-driven, limiting its perceived developmental value. The study concludes that firms can enhance legitimacy and sustainability impact by embedding ethical integrity, prioritizing environmental initiatives, and adopting participatory approaches that co-create CSR strategies with stakeholders. When aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), CSR

can transcend token efforts and become a credible driver of inclusive, sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Public Relations, Participatory Communication, Sustainable Development, Stakeholder Engagement, and Public Perception

## ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Nijerya'nın Orta Kuşağındaki özel sektör firmalarının kurumsal sosyal sorumluluk (KSS) uygulamalarıyla kamu algılarının nasıl şekillendiğini ve sürdürülebilir kalkınmanın nasıl ilerletildiğini araştırmaktadır. Topluluk merkezli bir yaklaşım kullanarak, sosyal kaygıların, çevresel sorumluluğun, etik davranışın, topluluk katılımının ve KSS girişimlerinin uygunluğunun meşruiyet ve etki algılarını nasıl etkilediğini araştırmaktadır; bu araştırma Katılımcı İletişim, KSS ve Paydaş teorilerine dayanmaktadır. Dangote Cement PLC (DCP) ve MTN Nigeria'dan etkilenen topluluklardaki 623 katılımcıyla yapılan bir anket, Kısmi En Küçük Kareler Yapısal Eşitlik Modellemesi (PLS-SEM) kullanılarak altı gizli yapıyı incelemiştir. Sonuçlar, etik kaygıların (DCP  $R^2 = 0,460$ ; MTN  $R^2 = 0,471$ ) ve çevresel kaygıların (DCP  $R^2 = 0,392$ ; MTN  $R^2 = 0,397$ ) KSS algısının en güçlü yordayıcıları olduğunu ortaya koymakta ve şeffaflık, hesap verebilirlik ve ekolojik sorumluluğun önemini vurgulamaktadır. Bunun tersine, sürdürülebilir kalkınma ( $R^2 < 0,05$ ), sosyal kaygılar (negatif  $R^2$  değerleri), topluluk katılımı ( $\sim 0,05$ ) ve KSS'nin uygunluğu (negatif  $R^2$  değerleri) zayıf veya ihmal edilebilir etki gösterdi ve bu da KSS girişimlerinin genellikle topluluk öncelikleri ve kalkınma ihtiyaçlarıyla yeterince uyumlu olmadığını gösteriyor. Bulgular, bölgede KSS'nin büyük ölçüde yukarıdan aşağıya ve imaj odaklı kaldığını ve algılanan kalkınma değerini sınırladığını vurguluyor. Çalışma, firmaların etik bütünlüğü benimseyerek, çevresel girişimlere öncelik vererek ve paydaşlarla birlikte KSS stratejilerini birlikte oluşturan katılımcı yaklaşımları benimseyerek meşruiyet ve sürdürülebilirlik etkisini artırabileceği sonucuna varıyor. BM Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma Hedefleri (SKH'ler) ile

uyumlu olduđunda, KSS sembolik abaların ötesine geçebilir ve kapsayıcı, sürdürülebilir kalkınmanın güvenilir bir itici gücü haline gelebilir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kurumsal Sosyal Sorumluluk (KSS), Halkla İlişkiler, Katılımcı İletişim, Sürdürülebilir Kalkınma, Paydaş Katılımı ve Kamuoyu Algısı

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to the Almighty God, my loving husband Dr. Ogbu Stephen Ajii, and our blessed children: PraiseGod, Pearl, Possible, Pillar, and Prophet Ajii.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DCP	Dangote Cement PLC
MTN	Mobile Telephone Network
PSFs	Private Sector Firms
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations

# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Overview

When a community provides the enabling environment for private sector firms (PSF) to carry out their operations within and around the locality, it is expected that such gestures would be reciprocated by such firms by demonstrating some form of (social) responsibility through contributions towards the host community's living conditions/and or standard of living. Therefore, it is arguably important for every corporate citizen to respond to developmental initiatives by showing support for the people's needs— their socio-economic and environmental concerns as well as any felt needs.

Studies have shown that the activities of certain oil firms, particularly in the Niger Delta, have severely undermined livelihoods by contaminating farmland and fisheries, thereby deepening economic vulnerability within affected communities (Nkem et al., 2024). In a similar vein, Yahaya et al. (2024) highlight that residents of communities located near cement factories face heightened health risks as a result of environmental pollution. Supporting this line of evidence, Crisóstomo (2025) contends that environmental degradation linked to private corporate activities has translated into significant financial losses across multiple sectors worldwide. Likewise, Du, Li, and Zou (2024) demonstrate that trade driven by private sector firms exerts complex and far-reaching negative impacts

on ecosystems and human health while Banerjee (2008) maintain that some of the firms' operations have undeniable negative economic, social, and environmental effects; putting extra demands on corporations to be more socially responsible.

While it has been argued that some private sector firms (PSFs) are exploiters and impact negatively on the wellbeing of the society, their positive impact on sustainable development cannot also be denied. Corroborating this position, Sharma et al. (2025), Milhem et al. (2024), Richey et al. cited in Kamara (2020), and Idemudia (2014) contend that businesses play a critical role in addressing social, environmental, and socioeconomic challenges. They emphasize the importance of creating employment opportunities and embedding sustainable, socially responsible practices into core business operations. Also, by offering higher wages compared to self-employment alternatives, private sector firms (PSFs) contribute to economic growth and help enhance the standard of living in host communities and nations. Further, Tonelson in Kamara (2020) and Scelles et al. (2024) maintain that corporations have a propensity to boost locals' purchasing power, which can additionally result in a rise in tax revenue for the governments of the host countries; again, the government will be able to spend more money on social welfare, including healthcare, education, transportation, and infrastructures, as more capital investment and resources become available. It is therefore, evident from the above assertions that the PSFs and their public relations' (PR) or corporate social responsibility initiatives can be of immense benefit to the society; they can be useful agents of sustainable development. This assertion also corroborates Saputra and Hanutama (2025) and Visser's (2011) submissions that there is now widespread agreement that the private sector is ideally positioned to significantly improve social, economic, and environmental circumstances in Africa; just

as Abdul-Azeez et al. (2024) and Zhang and Hao (2024) note that the participation of multiple players, including private firms, might be helpful in addressing underdevelopment.

Additionally, given the prevailing distrust in the government and the politically polarized environment, public expectations of PSFs' roles and responsibilities in society have increased (Milhem et al., 2024; Lee and Chung, 2023). Thus, this study adopts a non-managerial perspective of CSR to investigate how community engagement affects the effectiveness of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives in promoting sustainable development. It explores how community members perceive and are influenced by private sector firms' CSR initiatives. The study also evaluates the broader societal and environmental impacts of corporate firms' activities on community and sustainable development in Nigeria. Furthermore, it assesses whether these firms are acting responsibly and ethically towards the stakeholders, particularly in their contributions to social welfare, environmental sustainability, and the public good beyond their immediate business interests.

Nigeria stands as Africa's fourth-largest economy by gross domestic product (GDP) (Statista, 2024), driven by vital sectors such as oil and gas, agriculture, manufacturing, mining and quarrying (coal, limestone, gold), telecommunications, and services, all projected to expand by 3.5% in 2025 (iAfrica, 2025). Yet, like many African nations, the country continues to grapple with the depletion of natural resources and widespread poverty (Aji and Damak, 2025). In this context, the private sector is increasingly seen as

a crucial partner in addressing socio-economic challenges, especially given the government's limited capacity to confront them effectively (Chu et al., 2023).

Nigeria was chosen for this study not only because of its scale but also its diversity. As Africa's most populous nation and one of its leading economies, the country represents a valuable lens for understanding the socio-economic dynamics of Sub-Saharan Africa. Its development path—marked by policy reforms, engagement in global frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and partnerships with international organizations including the World Bank and the African Development Bank—underscores its regional and global significance.

Moreover, Nigeria's paradoxical condition—a resource-rich nation burdened with persistent poverty—offers a compelling case for examining how private sector-led initiatives can foster sustainable development. The coexistence of poverty alleviation programs, socio-economic reforms, and dynamic corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices by private firms provides an instructive model for other African countries facing similar conditions. By addressing challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and insecurity within an imbalanced economic structure, Nigeria presents a multifaceted example of how CSR can contribute to sustainable development. Its experience yields critical insights not only for Sub-Saharan Africa but also for the broader global discourse on balancing resource wealth, socio-economic inclusion, and community engagement.

## **1.2 Background to the Study**

Public relations (PR) plays a vital role in managing relationships with various stakeholders and the general public; therefore, assessing the performance of PSFs' PR practices in

Nigeria is crucial not just for building and maintaining a favorable reputation for the firms, but also to establish a nexus between sustainable development and the firm's overall performance.

According to Lim and Greenwood (2017) and Somerville and Wood (2016), Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) serves as the primary communication management tool in public relations. This assertion was corroborated by Tworzydło et al. (2024) when they posited that CSR holds a prominent and central position within the field of PR. Consequently, CSR has become an essential corporate strategy for businesses and institutions, especially in today's highly competitive business environment where public relations plays a leading role in driving the global transition toward sustainability (Geysi, 2025)

Still emphasizing on the need for all-inclusive collaboration in the achievement of the sustainable development objectives, Omekwu, et al. (2023, p. 626) note that:

...this universal agenda is a call for suitable program of action for developed, developing and underdeveloped countries of the world. It emphasizes a vision of "leaving no one behind" which would only be accomplished through increased partnerships co-operation among major stakeholders such as governments, civil society, private sector, and the United Nations system. In practice, it requires the integration of economic, environmental, and social objectives across sectors, territories, and generations. The agenda is geared towards poverty eradication, inclusive education, environmental protection, gender equality, disease prevention, good governance e t c...

Voyko and Voyko (2022) assert the importance of recognizing that companies significantly impact people's lives. Beyond providing employment and generating wealth, they act as agents of development within their communities. Acknowledging this, many

large companies leverage the expectations created by corporate social responsibility to gain competitive advantages and foster relationships among various stakeholders. Li et al., (2025), Ungson et al. (2023), Vargas Merino and Rios Lama (2023), Clyde and Karnani (2015) and Kahraman Akdoğu (2017) also discuss the indispensable roles played by private sector initiatives and their engagement in poverty alleviation and sustainable development through corporate social responsibility (CSR). Dempere et al. (2023) and Spencer (2018) argue that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlight the necessity for the private sector to play a central role in achieving the 2030 development agenda, given that governments and multilateral development agencies alone cannot meet these goals. The private sector possesses the capital, resources, and influence needed for significant impact, with CSR acting as a key driver of sustainable development (Li et al. 2025; Ashurov et al., 2024). Regarding poverty alleviation through CSR initiatives of multinational corporations, McKague et al. (2015) assert that creating productive jobs for low-income individuals as the government provide public services, infrastructure, and a conducive business environment are crucial for the private sector to act as an agent of development. Further, McKague et al. (2015) highlight the important role of civil society as a catalyst and watchdog, ensuring that both the private sector and governments adhere to societal regulations and expectations.

Based on the above assertions, this study adopts the non-managerial perspective and focuses leveraging the public feedback mechanisms by examining the trend and/or shift in the perceived role of businesses from being merely profit-driven entities to becoming agents of development, as outlined by the United Nations SDGs. Consequently, by considering the public perspective, this study explores the overall contribution of private

sector firms to sustainable development, anchored on CSR indicators such as community engagement, environmental and social impacts, ethical business practices etc.

### **1.2.1 Sustainable Development as a Conceptual Framework for Corporate Social Responsibility**

Public relations primarily revolves around fostering understanding and cultivating positive relationships with diverse stakeholders and key publics such as community members, government bodies, institutions, and media outlets, among others. This entails a special focus on forging alliances with business stakeholders who possess the potential to expedite the implementation of their corporate solutions to support the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Kadhim et al. (2024) and Bhagwat (2011, p. 7) contend that “CSR is an integral part of sustainable development”. In the same line of thought, Juščius (2007) identifies CSR as one of the most recent theoretical models contributing to the understanding and advancement of sustainable development. Ebekoziem et al. (2025) made a compelling case for the pivotal involvement of the private sector in the achievement of the United Nations' sustainable development goals. This argument is set in contrast to Nyagadza (2021) viewpoint, emphasizing the prevalence of unsustainable resource utilization in Africa. Nyagadza's (2021) position stresses the necessity for distinctive public relations strategies to create awareness about sustainable practices and stimulate the adoption of these practices within the business sector. These strategies are aligned with the United Nations' sustainable development goals, which were universally embraced by all member states in 2015 and enshrined in the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. The UN SDG metrics cover a wide range of areas, including “poverty alleviation, hunger, health,

education, gender equality, clean water, sanitation, affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, industry innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, climate action, life below water, life on land, peace and justice, and partnerships for the goals” (United Nations, 2023).

According to UN report; the “agenda is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity... that seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom... All countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership will implement this plan in order to free the human race from poverty and hunger” (UN Reports, 2023). Thus, the sustainability agenda as used in this study is discussed on the premise of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) which has overall 17 points sustainable development goals. One of the focus of this study is the growing and sustained emphasis on environmental issues within the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Environmental stability remains a central challenge to achieving sustainable development, as highlighted in seven of the 17 SDGs—namely Goals 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15—which address critical issues such as pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, climate change, deforestation, global warming, and ecological degradation. (Aneja et al., 2024; Dada et al., 2024; United Nations, 2023).

Drawing on the broad conceptualization of CSR proposed by Medina-Muñoz and Medina-Muñoz (2020)—which emphasizes an institution's stated commitments and its relationships with various stakeholders in fulfilling economic, social, and environmental responsibilities, as well as its adherence to principles of transparency, information sharing,

and ethical conduct—this study examines the CSR practices of private sector firms (PSFs) in relation to sustainable development. Specifically, it investigates how these CSR initiatives contribute to the achievement of sustainable development goals in Nigeria. In doing so, the study also explores public perceptions of the impact of CSR strategies within the selected region.

### **1.3 Statement of the Problem and Research Gap**

Nigeria's governance system has faced persistent challenges, notably corruption, mismanagement, and ineffective policy implementation in harnessing the country's vast human and natural resources. These systemic issues have contributed to widespread economic hardship and deepening poverty, undermining key sectors such as education, healthcare, and environmental sustainability, and significantly impeding the nation's progress toward sustainable development (Ajii and Damak, 2025; Abdulrahman, 2023; Agu et al., 2020; Surajo et al. 2018). Etalong and Aduma (2023) highlight that Nigeria's governance, marked by bribery, intimidation, and violence, requires both collaborative and epistocratic or expertise approach to tackle problems such as election fraud, terrorist attacks, herder-farmer conflicts, armed banditry, and police brutality, among other vices that exacerbate underdevelopment in Nigeria.

Again, the Macro Poverty Outlook for Nigeria paints a grim picture. According to the World Bank (2023), Nigeria's poverty rate was estimated at 38.9% in 2023, with projections indicating that 13 million more Nigerians could fall below the poverty line by 2025 due to population growth outpacing poverty reduction efforts (Adebayo, 2025; The Guardian, 2025). Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics reports that 63% of the population, totaling 133 million people, live in multidimensional poverty (Oluwole, 2023;

National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Approximately 87 million Nigerians are estimated to live below the poverty line, making Nigeria home to the world's second-largest poor population after India. This report underscores that despite Nigeria's status as one of Africa's largest economies with a vast population, opportunities are limited for many citizens, particularly in the northern regions where access to education, electricity, safe drinking water, and sanitation remains inadequate.

Similarly, within the context of the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria, Peter Obi, who emerged a runner-up in the 2023 presidential elections representing the Labour Party, claimed that Nigeria as a nation-state had lost its power in the provision of basic social services and security. Particularly, in the aftermath of the corona pandemic, he expressed concerns about the country being overrun by regressive forces, resulting in a decline across various development indicators (Obi, 2022). The question of whether Nigeria is on the brink of becoming a failed state has emerged as a perplexing issue, given the prevailing socio-economic and security challenges.

Scholars such as Oko et al. (2018) attribute Nigeria's potential state failure to factors such as the ongoing sectarian conflict, escalating poverty and unemployment rates, and severe security issues. The government's apparent inability to effectively address these issues adds to the complexity of the situation. Also, the 2020 Voluntary National Review (VNR) on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for Nigeria underscores specific challenges, including poverty, economic inclusivity, health, education, gender equality, peace, security challenges, and a lack of partnerships (Vanguard, 2022).

Further, Oloruntuyi (2019) highlighted Nigeria's distinction as the country with the highest number of people living in extreme poverty in 2018, as reported by the World Poverty Clock. As at now (2025), the situation has deteriorated further, with Nigerian citizens resorting to looting both government and private warehouses in order to obtain food supplies (Muhammad, 2024; BusinessDay, 2024; Nigerian Bulletin, 2024; Adaoyiche, 2024; Nairaland Forum, 2024). This scenario and the unfolding events mirror a time of great distress for Nigerians, stemming from economic hardships. Consequently, there has been a growing call for private sector involvement in development-oriented programmes, aligning with the broader PR sustainable development practices of PSFs (Adamolekun and Ogedengbe, 2020; Scherer and Palazzo, 2011). This echoes the approach advocated by Kamara (2020) for addressing socio-economic and environmental issues in Sierra Leone.

Hence, given the inadequacies in government initiatives to address the current socio-economic and environmental crisis (Ajii and Damak, 2025), this study explores the role of the private sector in supporting national development through their CSR initiatives especially through active engagement with members of the community. In other words, moving forward necessitates collaborative efforts from both public and private sectors to meet the nation's developmental requirements. Lee and Chung (2023); Davis et al. (2023) and Osagie (2017) advocate for such collaboration, highlighting that some private companies in Nigeria have successfully advanced CSR initiatives to contribute to sustainable growth. However, it is lamentable that many leading private firms prioritize making huge profits at the expense of stakeholders and often neglect the needs of their host communities. For example, studies by Oshioste et al. (2023), Nduwe Kalagbor et al.

(2022), and Chondough (2021) highlight that despite Nigeria's status as the world's fifth-largest oil producer and Africa's largest economy, the country grapples with severe socio-political dissonance, environmental degradation, poverty, poor corporate social responsibility engagement by private firms, and a lack of sustainable development. Issues like employee welfare, environmental protection, and community development are frequently overlooked or disregarded by firms (Osagie, 2017; Nsikan et al., 2015). Ekwok et al. (2018) also observed that the CSR practices and discourse within private firms leave much to be desired, indicating room for improvement.

Examining the issue from a different perspective, Idemudia (2014) submits that the focal point of the contemporary discourse on the performance of private sector firms (PSFs) has shifted from questioning whether businesses can contribute to development to determining the most effective ways to maximize their contribution to sustainable development. Despite generating substantial revenues from the community or nation, PSFs have faced accusations of insensitivity towards stakeholder interests (Tapang and Basse, 2017; Osagie, 2017). Further, some critics contend that these firms have neglected to consider public preferences and formulate proactive courses of action that fit with those preferences, even before government regulations dictate such actions. Telecommunications companies, in particular, have been increasingly challenged to meet demands for social responsibility (Adamolekun and Ogedengbe, 2020; Tapang and Basse, 2017). Bamiduro (2015), in his study titled *Evaluation of Corporate Social Responsibility on Community Development: A Study of Globalcom Nigeria Limited*, examines the various CSR initiatives undertaken by Globalcom Nigeria Limited, a telecommunications company in Nigeria. The study assesses the impact of the company's

CSR programmes on community development. The findings reveal a significant relationship between CSR and community development, with about 70% confidence level. Despite confirming a positive correlation between the variables, the study also indicates that most customers are unaware of Globalcom's contributions to sustainable development, which challenges the company's claims regarding these contributions. This can also be interpreted that the impact of the CSR initiatives of this telecommunication is so insignificant that it is not felt by the community members.

Further on this issue, Büyüközkan and Karabulut (2018) highlight that numerous researchers have explored the discourse of sustainable development and corporate social responsibility (CSR), making it a prominent subject in academic literature. Despite its prevalence, a significant portion of these investigations predominantly concentrates on environmental aspects, often equating sustainability solely with minimal ecological impacts while neglecting its economic and social facets. Also, there is a common oversight in the literature regarding the integration of sustainable development with development communication, particularly in addressing the specific developmental needs of local communities in Nigeria and the Middle Belt region.

Building on the foregoing discussion, this study examines the corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices of Mobile Telephone Network (MTN) Nigeria and Dangote Cement Plc (DCP) from the perspective of public perception. These firms were selected due to their strong commitment to CSR and the significant societal impact of their initiatives in Nigeria. MTN, as the most widely used telecommunications network in the country, demonstrates extensive reach and connectivity, while DCP, the largest listed

cement company in West Africa, plays a key role in CSR through the Aliko Dangote Foundation (ADF). Consequently, the CSR practices of both firms, as reflected in standard constructs established in literature and practice, make them suitable case studies for exploring private sector contributions to sustainable development, particularly in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs).

Thus, this study addresses critical questions concerning the implementation of the United Nations' sustainable development agenda in Africa, with a particular focus on Nigeria. It explores, from the perspective of non-managerial stakeholders (the public), whether meaningful progress toward sustainable development can be achieved in the absence of significant engagement with community members and substantial contributions from these two selected private sector firms. Further, the study reveals how the public perceive the impact of CSR strategies, the appropriateness, and the benefits of CSR initiatives *vis-à-vis* PR practices of private sector firms on sustainable development in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria. The emphasis is on leveraging public feedback mechanisms, to understand the performance of PSFs in their role of contributing to sustainable development in Nigeria in accordance with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

#### **1.4 Research Aim and Objectives**

This study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the public relations practices *vis-à-vis* CSR initiatives of private sector firms (PSFs) and their contributions to sustainable development in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria.

Specifically, this study aims at the following objectives:

1. To examine public perceptions of the impact of CSR *strategies vis-à-vis* PR practices of private sector firms on sustainable development in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria.
2. To evaluate the public perception of the appropriateness and benefits of the public relations tools *vis-à-vis* sustainable development practices of private sector firms in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria.
3. To explore the relationship between corporate social responsibility initiatives, sustainable development practices and development communication in Nigeria's private sector firms in line with the UN SDGs.
4. To investigate the impacts of environmental sustainability CSR initiatives of private sector firms towards sustainable development in Nigeria.

## **1.5 Research Questions**

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are public perceptions on the impact of CSR strategies *vis-à-vis* PR practices of private sector firms on sustainable development in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria?
2. How does the public perceive the appropriateness and benefits of the public relations tools in relation to the sustainable development practices of private sector firms in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria?
3. What is the relationship among corporate social responsibility initiatives, sustainable development practices, and development communication in Nigeria's private sector firms in line with the UN SDGs?

4. What are the impacts of environmental sustainability CSR initiatives of private sector firms on sustainable development in Nigeria?

## **1.6 Research Hypothesis**

In line with Consistent with the objectives of this study, the following hypotheses were formulated to guide the empirical investigation:

H1: Public perceptions of CSR activities of MTN and Dangote Cement Plc are positively associated with their perceived contributions to sustainable development in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria.

H2: Community engagement through participatory communication is positively associated with public perceptions of the sustainable development outcomes of CSR initiatives in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria.

H3: Environmental sustainability CSR initiatives are positively associated with public perceptions of their contribution to sustainable development in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria.

H4: Ethical CSR practices (e.g., transparency, accountability, corruption-free conduct) are positively associated with public perceptions of sustainable development outcomes in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria.

## **1.7 Significance of the Study**

This study makes a pioneering contribution by illuminating the public relations practices of private sector firms (PSFs) and their influence on sustainable development in the

Middle Belt Region of Nigeria; using corporate social responsibility as a dynamic tool in the PR management processes. The participatory communication dimension of this study offers valuable insights into the unique development challenges of Nigeria's Middle Belt region, highlighting the critical role of community engagement in achieving sustainable development. By examining how participatory approaches influence the effectiveness of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, the study demonstrates that meaningful community involvement enhances the impact of CSR, while its absence undermines sustainability outcomes. This emphasizes the limitations of the predominantly top-down CSR strategies commonly practiced in Nigeria, thereby distinguishing this study.

Specifically, the proposed **Participatory Communication Model (PCM)** approach tailored for the specific needs and aspirations of local communities offers a more effective framework for enhancing both the perceived legitimacy and actual impact of CSR activities. Also, by actively involving communities in the planning and implementation of CSR programs, firms can foster greater trust, relevance, and sustainability in their development efforts through this inclusive, bottom-up strategy.

This study offers strategic insights to guide private sector companies' investment decisions in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria and to inform government policies. It demonstrates that, despite the limited efficacy of private sector firms' current CSR initiatives, enhanced stakeholder engagement can lead to significant and long-lasting contributions to community and sustainable development. In order to synchronize corporate initiatives with both short-term community needs and long-term development goals, inclusive,

community-driven approaches are crucial, as the findings underscore the importance of implementing a participatory communication model in CSR planning and execution.

Even in the absence of other motivations for undertaking this study on PSFs CSR initiatives, the evolving composition of local communities, the imperative of resource sustainability, and the positive reputation it can generate for the private sector firms underscore its significance. In the context of this study, the establishment of a resilient socio-economic environment through the adoption of participatory CSR strategies is not only anticipated to yield positive impacts on individual lives in the host community but also to foster comprehensive growth and development in Nigeria, in line with the metrics of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Further, the study's findings will not only guide PSFs in broadening their corporate social responsibility initiatives to boost their public image but will also facilitate the cultivation of stronger relationships with diverse stakeholders, including the immediate host community. These efforts are essential for advancing the sustainability agenda and ensuring long-term success in operations for Nigeria or applicable in other African context. The study also serves as a guide for private sector firms not included in the research, assisting them in reengineering their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives towards developmental goals. The goal is to foster comprehensive sustainable development through the implementation of the PCM strategies.

Additionally, the study will empower top executives of private sector firms to either intensify their commitment to enhancing CSR activities or establish a well-organized

public relations department if they currently lack one. This research not only enriches the understanding of CSR and its enduring positive effects on sustainable development, participatory communication, and relationship-building among fellow researchers but also contributes valuable insights to the existing literature in participatory communication, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and stakeholder and community engagement, supporting future research endeavors.

Ultimately, the aspiration is that by advocating for the sustainability agenda through participatory CSR, other private firms operating in Nigeria will recognize the pressing need to increase their efforts, thereby contributing to the overall sustainable development of the middle belt states and Nigeria as a whole.

### **1.8 Scope and Delimitation of the Study**

This research evaluates Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) performance of PSFs and its impact on sustainable development. The study analyzes how the Public Relations (PR) practices of PSFs address specific developmental challenges in Nigeria. The study primarily concentrates on evaluating the impact of CSR initiatives on sustainable development in selected states (Benue, Kogi, Plateau and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja) of the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria, using the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) metrics and CSR indicators as benchmarks. The telecommunications company, Mobile Telephone Network of Nigeria (MTNN) and the Dangote Cement PLC (DCP) were specifically examined to understand their respective roles in fostering sustainable development in the region.

The CSR performance indicators of PSFs and development communication in relation to sustainable development are explored with a focus on the two selected firms — Mobile Telephone Network of Nigeria (MTNN), a telecommunication company and Dangote Cement PLC (DCP).

The CSR initiatives of these two Nigerian PSFs typically focus on key areas such as:

- *Education*: the firms support educational initiatives, including building schools in rare cases, providing scholarships, and supplying educational materials.
- *Healthcare*: CSR efforts often extend to healthcare, with companies investing in occasional construction of healthcare facilities and the provision of medical services.
- *Community Development*: Projects targeting community development, such as infrastructure improvement, access to clean water, and poverty alleviation, are common.
- *Environmental Sustainability*: Beyond these two firms, an increasing number of companies are recognizing the importance of environmental sustainability, leading to initiatives related to environmental conservation and eco-friendly practices.

## **1.9 Organizational Profile**

### **1.9.1 Mobile Telephone Network of Nigeria (MTNN)**

#### ***MTNN Profile***

Mobile Telephone Network of Nigeria (MTNN) is a South African multinational telecommunication company operating in over 20 countries of the world with one of its branches based in Nigeria and some other countries in the Middle East. The firm enjoys

high patronage with its subscribers increasing to over 290 million in 2021 (About MTN, 2024; MTN Annual Financial Report, 2021).

According to Chinwe and Kemi (2016), the advent of GSM telecommunication in Nigeria was supervised by the Nigerian Communication Commission (NCC) and MTNN was the first to subscribe with NCC. MTNN was incorporated in Nigeria on 11th August, 2000 and this telecommunication company has about 6700 employees (Apollo.io, 2024). Though the company was incorporated in 2000, it was licensed for operation on 9th February, 2001 and started networking on 16th May, 2001 as commercial operations first commenced in Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Today however, MTNN has offices and outlets in the 36 states of the federation including Abuja; the state capital.

According to reports by NCC, the telecommunication firm has **87 million** subscribers in Nigeria as at December 2023 out of the nation's total subscribers' base (Awowede, 2024) constituting a huge market as a multi-national company (MNC) in the country.

### ***MTNN CSR Projects***

The MTN Nigeria Foundation Limited by Guarantee (MTNF Ltd/Gte) was founded in July, 2004 in order to concentrate MTNN's efforts on its CSR projects and support sustainable development in Nigeria (Sharedata 2024; MTN Annual Reports, 2021).

MTNF Ltd/Gte was established in order to strategically address three critical areas of need, namely education, health, and economic empowerment with a commitment of **1%** of its profit annually for the funding of CSR projects in these areas (MTN Annual Reports, 2021).

Hence, MTNN has engaged in numerous CSR projects on the bases of their areas of focus such as;

*Economic Empowerment:* MTN empowers the physically challenged and people with disabilities across the country; they harness local talents through music; enable rural telephony; employees' involvement and training; 'MTN cares'— responds to the plight of orphans and vulnerable children, they engage in training programmes and awareness workshops in some Nigerian universities among other such projects.

*Education:* MTN invests in ICT projects in Nigeria institutions to bridge the gap in digital and knowledge divide; donate books to schools; and constructs libraries for some institutions in Nigeria.

*Health:* Some years back, MTN constructed 5 sickle cell clinics in: Lagos (2), Benin, Asaba, and Kan. They partner with other agencies in awareness campaigns and voluntary counseling against HIV-AIDS and malaria. They engage in testing (VCT) for some communities across the 6 Geopolitical zones in Nigeria. They also run healing toll free project— grief and trauma counseling services (MTN Annual Reports; MTN Annual Financial Results, 2021).

### **1.9.2 Dangote Industries Limited**

#### ***Profile of Dangote Group***

Dangote Industries Limited is one of the leading businesses in the provision of daily needs of food and shelter in the Sub-Saharan Africa. Founded in 1970s by Aliko Dangote as a bulk commodity trading business. Today however, the business has grown to be one of the largest conglomerates in West Africa with its operations in 17 African countries and a market leader in cement

on the African continent; with the Dangote Cement Plc, being the largest listed company in West Africa and the first Nigerian company to join the Forbes Global 2000 Companies list (Dangote Group, 2022).

Dangote Group has its operations in other sectors of the Nigeria economy and across Africa in the sugar, salt, condiments, packaging, energy, port operations, fertilizer and petrochemicals businesses.

### ***Subsidiaries of Dangote Group***

The Nigerian group of businesses, Dangote has broad interests in a number of industries that touch on numerous areas of business such as:

- Dangote Cement Plc
- Dangote Sugar Refinery
- NASCON Allied Industries Plc (Manufacturer of Dangote salt and seasoning, Dangote tomato paste and Dangote vegetable oil).
- Dangote Fertilizer Plant
- Dangote Rice Ltd
- Dangote Petroleum Refinery
- Dangote Petrochemical Plant
- Dangote Packaging Ltd
- MHF Properties Ltd (Dangote real estate business outfit)
- Dangote Mines (Coal mining for power generation).
- Greenview Development Nigeria Ltd (Bulk cargo operations and containerisation).

- Dangote Automative Joint Ventures (Joint venture with Sinotruck- assemble trucks and cars in Nigeria for local use and export in collaboration with Anambra Manufacturing Company ANAMMCO in Emene, Enugu)
- Dangote Tomato Processing (with about 3 billion greenhouse nurseries in Kano for increased output in high quality tomato seedlings).
- Dangote Academy (for corporate leadership skills, technical training, and vocational skills acquisition).
- Dangote flour Mills (Located in Kano with 3 subsidiaries: - Dangote Noodles Ltd, Dangote Pasta Ltd. and Dangote Agro sacks Ltd.).
- Dansa Foods (Located at Ikeja, Lagos and Kano; and engaged with the production of natural fruit juice, tomato paste, cotton etc.) (Dangote Group, 2022).

***Dangote Range of Products***

- Dangote Group manufacture and deal with a range of products such as:
- Dangote Sugar
- Dangote Cement
- Dangote Salt
- Dangote Tomato Paste
- Dangote Sacks
- Danvita
- Dangote Macaroni
- Mowa Water
- Dangote Flour and Semolina
- Dangote Spaghetti
- Ziza Milk

- Dansa Juice
- Dangote Noodles
- Dangote vegetables oil
- Dangote fertilizer
- Dangote food seasoning etc (Dangote Group, 2022).

### ***CSR Projects of Dangote Group***

The corporate social responsibility division of the Dangote Group is called the Aliko Dangote Foundation (ADF), it was incorporated in 1994. The Foundation has contributed money as charity to a number of organizations, institutions and individuals in Nigeria and Africa (Dangote, 2024).

The Dangote Foundation's aims at increasing prospects for social change by making smart investments in bettering people's health and wellbeing, advancing high-quality education, and expanding opportunities for economic empowerment. The foundation focuses its activities on health, empowerment as well as education, and disaster relief. Further, it aids independent initiatives that have the potential to have a big social impact (About Dangote Foundation, 2024; Dangote, 2024).

To further its humanitarian agenda, the foundation collaborates with the states and federal government of Nigeria using the public-private partnerships (PPP) model. They also collaborate with numerous reputable international and domestic charities, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations, including CHI Health, the African Development Bank Group, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, United Nation

Economic Commission for Africa, GBC Health, Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (gain) for CSR projects (About Dangote Foundation, 2024; Dangote, 2024).

### ***Health Interventions***

In order to eradicate polio and improve routine immunization in Nigeria, the Dangote Foundation joined forces with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and important northern state governments in 2013 in executing some health projects (About Dangote Foundation, 2024; Dangote, 2024).

### ***Education***

The foundation had made N1 billion about (684,000 USD) contribution for Nigerian universities since its inception including N500 million about (342,000 USD) for development of a business school in Bayero University, Kano (North West Region) and N100 million to Otuoke University in Bayelsa State (South-South Region) in 2013. Another key intervention made by the Dangote Foundation to the educational sector in Nigeria was the donation of fully equipped rooms with capacity for housing 2160 students, built at a cost of N1.2 billion about (821, 000USD) and donated to Ahmadu Bello University, (ABU) Zaria (North West Region) (About Dangote Foundation, 2024; Dangote, 2024).

### ***Empowerment***

The Dangote Foundation empowers women using micro-grant programme aimed at poverty alleviation through economic empowerment of women. The Foundation had disbursed N230 million about (157 USD) to women in Kogi State as a micro-grant as part of the Kogi Human Capital Development initiative (About Dangote Foundation, 2024; Dangote, 2024).

### ***Humanitarian Relief***

The foundation had contributed in support of vulnerable groups such as communities displaced by natural disasters, ethno-religious crises or several other disasters in order to ameliorate their sufferings. For example, relief materials worth N50 million about (330,000 USD) was donated in 2010 to community leaders in Jos, following a prolonged ethno-religious crisis. The Foundation also donated \$2 million to the World Food Programme as part of efforts to help Pakistani nationals devastated by floods in that same year (2010) (About Dangote Foundation, 2024; Dangote, 2024).

### **1.9.3 Justification for the Selection of the Firms**

MTNN and Dangote Groups were selected for this study because of their strong affinity for CSR and the crucial role these firms have played in impacting on the society and Nigeria as a country through their numerous CSR initiatives. For example, MTNN clearly stated in their vision and mission statement the desire to use their core business activity to further the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. They also pledged allegiance to assist governments, communities, and clients in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which include a strategy to end poverty, safeguard the environment, and ensure equality for all by 2030 (Statista, 2024b; MTN Group, 2024).

Using Carrols's four categories of economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary (philanthropic) as well as the CSR indicators listed earlier as a definitional framework for CSR; MTNN and Dangote Groups are eligible and meet the standard constructs of CSR used both in practice and literature. In other words, Mobile Telephone Network (MTN) Nigeria and Dangote Cement Plc (DCP) were selected as representative examples of

private sector CSR in Nigeria, given their strong commitment to CSR and the significant societal impact of their initiatives in local communities. MTN, as the country's most widely used telecommunications network, exemplifies extensive reach and connectivity, while DCP, the largest listed cement company in West Africa, plays a central role in the CSR programmes of the Dangote Group through the Aliko Dangote Foundation (ADF). The CSR practices of both firms, grounded in constructs widely recognized in literature and practice, therefore provide suitable case studies for examining private sector contributions to sustainable development, particularly in relation to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs). However, it remains uncertain how the CSR initiatives of the selected firms have impacted the people and sustainable development in Nigeria's Middle Belt Region.

### **1.10 Study Area**

The Federal Republic of Nigeria is made up of 36 States and Abuja which serves as the Federal Capital. Six geopolitical zones—the North Central (NC), North East (NE), North West (NW), South West (SW), South East (SE), and South-South (SS) are used to categorize the states (Christopher et al., 2024; Chiaka et al., 2022). The Middle Belt Region is the focus of this study. The Middle Belt Region also known as the North Central zone spans the entire width of the nation; bordering Cameroon in the East and Benin Republic in the West. The region consists of six states— Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja.

### **1.10.1 Socio-economic and Political Background of the Middle Belt Region (MBR) of Nigeria**

This region is critical to this study because it is centrally located and has borders with all the other five regions while hosting the capital of Nigeria – Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja. The region is the meeting point of the predominantly Christian South and the predominately Muslim North; thus, the region maintains a high level of ethnolinguistic/religious diversity while serving as a multi-cultural domain (Johnstone, 2018). According to Abejide (2017) the Middle-Belt true to its name, is located in central Nigeria, and interacting with both the North and the South with large population of both Northern and Southern people. On this premise, to interpret the North to the South and the South to the North, the Middle Belt is always in the ideal position. It is therefore ideal to take into account the Middle Belt region for this study because of this vital geographic location. A study on CSR practices of PSFs will account for how much private firms have impacted on the sustainable development of the region which has always lag behind in the developmental history of Nigeria. Particularly that Abejide (2017) and Seri (2000) had argued that; since the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914, the people in the Middle Belt have been held in inhumane conditions, treated as second-class citizens, and given little to no consideration for their culture and traditions while their so-called masters wallowed in wealth and enjoyed the best of everything at the expense of the Middle-Belt people. This region, particularly Benue and Plateau States—has been experiencing persistent and widespread insecurity, largely driven by inequitable resource distribution. This has resulted in significant loss of lives and widespread destruction of property (Mustafa and Sa'ad, 2025; Nwan et al., 2024; Babatunde and Ibnouf, 2024; Fiase and Gbaden, 2024; Peter et al., 2024). These situations have also largely contributed to the slow

developmental growth of the region warranting a focus in the area as a case for the Nigerian sustainable development agenda in line with the UN SDGs.

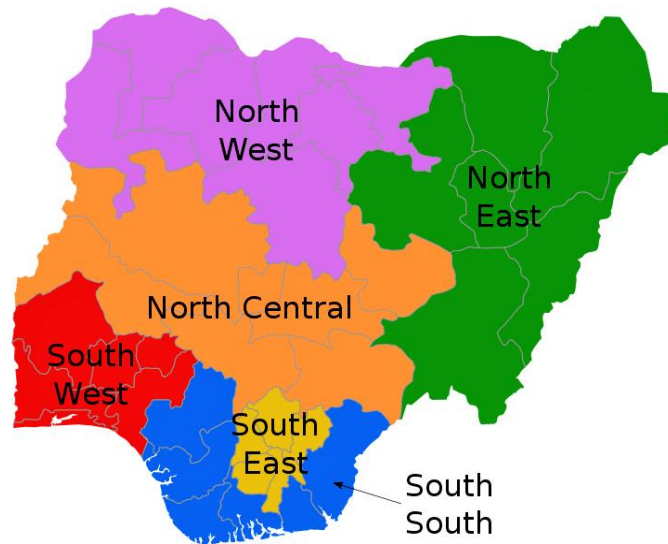


Figure 1.1 Six Geopolitical Regions of Nigeria

Figure 1.1 above illustrates the six geopolitical regions of Nigeria, namely: North West, North East, North Central (Middle Belt Region), South West, South East, and South-South. This delineation is based not merely on geographical boundaries, but primarily on shared ethnic identities and political histories within each region. The cultural and historical commonalities among communities in these regions provide a coherent basis for selecting and evaluating community members' perceptions on issues such as development, which directly affect them as a people.

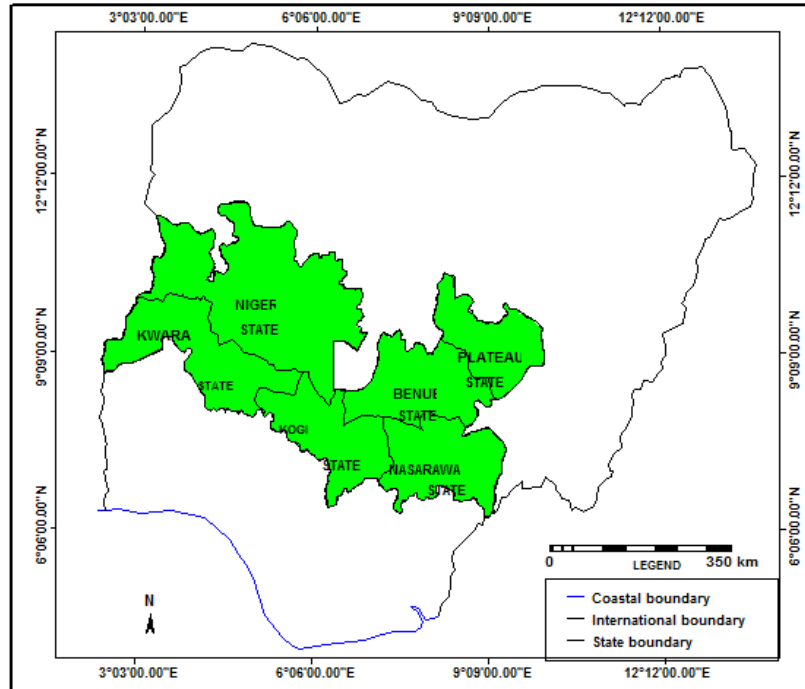


Figure 1.2 The Middle Belt Region (North Central States) of Nigeria (Oladimeji et al., 2015)

Figure 1.2 above depicts the North Central Region of Nigeria (Middle Belt Region), which comprises six states: Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau, and the Federal Capital Territory. The cultural composition of communities in this region reflects a blend of influences from both Northern and Southern Nigeria, making it a suitable context for evaluating development trajectories.

## Chapter 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Chapter Overview

Different scholars have expressed different, and sometimes conflicting opinions on the extent to which CSR by private firms can lead to a breakthrough in Africa's development. Generally speaking, Alshukri et al. (2024) and Mu et al. (2024) argue that incorporating CSR initiatives into core business strategies significantly impacts sustainable development in a positive way. However, Idemudia (2014) contends that the notion that businesses can aid in Africa's development through CSR is incorrect. He further opined that most PSFs involvement in development will always be insignificant for obvious reasons. On the other hand, Ebarefimia (2024) notes that CSR has the capacity and potential to impact and contribute positively to the development of the Nigerian society and businesses. Moreover, Ashurov et al. (2024) maintain that corporate social responsibility serves as a critical mechanism for advancing the core principles of sustainable development. Salam (2024) contends that CSR initiatives tend to be short-lived and fail to deliver lasting benefits to communities in the absence of strategic sustainability planning.

This study focuses on how community engagement influences the effectiveness of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives in promoting sustainable development.

It investigates public perceptions of the impact of CSR strategies and Public Relations (PR) practices of private sector firms (PSFs) in Nigeria's Middle Belt Region, using the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a framework for evaluation. The primary objective is to assess how these initiatives contribute to sustainable development outcomes and Nigeria's broader aspiration to become a leading African economy. Specifically, this research explores the extent to which CSR efforts by private sector firms are perceived to have tangibly benefited local communities in the Middle Belt, while also addressing the lack of community engagement that reduces the effectiveness of CSR in fostering sustainable development. Ultimately, the study seeks to highlight the potential of CSR to foster economic resilience and vitality in the region by promoting inclusive growth and sustainable development agenda.

## **2.2 Critical Issues**

### **2.2.1 Theoretical Perspectives on CSR**

CSR is a widely accepted practice among the private sector firms across the world (Saputra and Hanutama, 2025; Emeka-Okoli et al., 2024; Brasch and Eckert, 2024; Kovačić, 2015). Similarly, Ashurov et al. (2024); Kahraman Akdoğan (2017); Roig and Capriotti (2008) note that corporate social responsibility has become widely recognized as a prominent subject garnering extensive media attention and involving a broad spectrum of academic discourse. CSR is also a topic of discussion across several disciplines, frequently used as a blanket term for many strategies. Usmany (2024) and Collison (2024) also demonstrate how public and governmental organizations engage with CSR, particularly through policies and regulations that guide private sector firms in implementing CSR and promoting sustainable development. In the varied CSR sphere, it

makes sense that there is no single, commonly accepted definition of corporate social responsibility because of the diversity in usage and lack of consensus in its conceptualization (Zhang et al., 2024; Aguinis et al., 2024; Osobajo et al., 2019; Seele and Lock, 2015; Scherer and Palazzo, 2011; McWilliams and Siegel, 2011; Ojo, 2008). Bernard (2015) notes that CSR is determined by its context, which includes the political and organizational framework in which a firm operates as well as the organization's main objectives. However, in the interest of this study, scholarly concept appreciation will be made in an attempt to clarify the concept.

Bowen (2013b, p. 3) describes corporate social responsibility (CSR) as the obligation of business leaders to adopt policies, make decisions, and engage in actions that align with the objectives and values deemed desirable by society. Wan-Jan (2006) defines CSR as a company's dedication to reducing or eliminating any negative consequences and optimizing its long-term positive influence on society through its resources and business operations. Carroll (2016), says CSR is often regarded as the methods and actions that businesspeople do to ensure that society, or stakeholders, other than the business owners, are taken into account and others are protected. Emeka-Okoli et al. (2024) define corporate social responsibility as the voluntary initiatives undertaken by companies to address environmental, social, and governance (ESG) concerns within their operations and across their value chains. According to Kotler and Lee (2005) CSR is a dedication to enhancing community well-being through voluntary business practices and the allocation of corporate resources. On the other hand, Crowther and Aras (2008) define CSR as the manner in which firms oversee their business processes to generate an overall positive influence on the society.

Blowfield and Frynas (2005) stated that the concept of CSR is elusive, especially given the constant emergence of new initiatives; insisting that it has expanded to the point where it can now be interpreted and used in a variety of ways. Therefore, they proposed that CSR be viewed as an all-encompassing phrase for a multitude of theories and methods that acknowledge the following: (i). that businesses often go above and beyond the requirements of the law and individual liability when it comes to their influence on society and the environment; (ii). that firms are accountable for the actions of the people with whom they do business (such as through supplier chains); (iii). whether for reasons of commercial viability or to add value to society, firms need to manage its interaction with larger society.

Carroll (2016) however, maintained that almost all definitions include corporate philanthropy or business giving as a component of CSR, and many observers simply consider philanthropy when discussing CSR without taking into account the other areas of responsibility such as the legal, economic or even ethical considerations. These diverse definitions of CSR highlight its multidimensional nature, encompassing a wide range of societal and business-related concerns.

According to Utting, cited in Bernard (2015), CSR involves a broad spectrum of corporate initiatives aimed at advancing economic, environmental, and social welfare. These include targeted philanthropy, public-private partnerships, socially responsible investment, life cycle analysis, and triple-bottom-line reporting on social, environmental, and financial performance. This definition suggests that CSR, while framed around developmental

goals, also serves as a strategic tool for private firms to enhance their public image and promote their interests.

For Solihin in Osagie (2017, p. 1), CSR refers to the “relationships between corporation and all stakeholders, suppliers, government, and even their competitor. The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is often associated with the "3Ps" framework—*People, Planet, and Profit*—popularized by John Elkington (Elkington, 2018; Yeo et al. 2025). This *triple bottom line* approach aligns with ethical considerations that prioritize social equity (people), environmental stewardship (planet), and economic viability (profit) as interdependent pillars of sustainable development. As Yeo et al. (2025) suggests, this perspective positions CSR as a win-win business strategy that balances corporate success with broader societal and ecological responsibilities. It emphasizes that businesses should not solely focus on profit-making but must also demonstrate a responsible and compassionate commitment to both their internal and external communities, while safeguarding the environment in which they operate.

In the same vein, Ajii and Damak (2025) as well as Aaron in Bernard (2015) contend that using CSR can help a corporation forge deep ties with the communities where it operates and fill in for a state that is not up to its task. CSR could also be seen as a deliberate promotional strategy where businesses, institutions or corporations have obligation towards meeting societal needs by reaching out to a wider array of stakeholders (Gabler et al, 2017, p. 262; Jamali and Mirshak, 2007, p. 244; Dahlsrud, 2008). This goes to say that, CSR could serve in place of a government that is not living up to its responsibility

and expectations in performance, in terms of the provisions of social welfare geared towards supporting the masses and developing the society.

Landrum cited in Amoako et al (2019, p. 17) opines that CSR is a business strategy that offers several benefits to organisations because of its potential to influence and alter customers' perceptions of the organization. According to Nave and Ferreira (2019); organization must be able to distinguish itself and strategically position itself using CSR. Again, these assertions allude that CSR is not just viewed as a commitment of the private firms to societal needs as advocated by the founding fathers of CSR, but it is seen as a promotional tool for building reputation and gaining competitive advantages over other companies.

Conversely, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD, 2001) in Ganesh, M. K., and Venugopal, B. (2024, p3) defined CSR as “the commitment of business to contribute to sustainable economic development, working with employees, their families and the local communities”. This is much in line with the founding father's position when he defined CSR as “obligation to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society” (Bowen, 2013a, 1953). This definition links up with Bernard (2015, p. 11) definition that CSR denotes corporate activities directed towards social and environmental responsibilities to stakeholders over and above their financial responsibilities to shareholders; meaning that organizations must ensure that the positive influence they have on the society resulting from their management activities is in line with the needs and aspirations of the stakeholders and host community members.

However, reports on how private firms conduct their CSR activities and what they conceive of this concept has left much to be desired.

Conclusively, the concept of CSR has several elements and thus, it has become a signifier that tries to capture different things. As succinctly described by Carroll (2016), CSR means different things to different people depending on the context and the rationale behind its usage.

### **2.2.2 CSR and Sustainable Development**

The role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in promoting sustainable development is widely acknowledged and cannot be overemphasized. Ashurov et al. (2024) and Moon (2007) affirm that CSR plays a key role in realizing the principles of sustainable development. Supporting this perspective, the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development emphasizes that private sector investment and innovation are key drivers of productivity, inclusive economic growth, and job creation (Dempere et al., 2023). Li et al. (2025) further contend that corporate engagement in sustainable development fosters a win-win scenario—enhancing societal well-being while simultaneously expanding market opportunities for firms. Milhem et al. (2024) and Serfontein-Jordaan and Dlungwane (2022) note that CSR has become a core component of contemporary corporate strategies, particularly in promoting sustainable development objectives. Similarly, Vargas Merino and Rios Lama (2023), in a systematic literature review, found that CSR is a critical contributor to sustainable development, although the underlying motivations behind corporate CSR efforts may not always align with this goal. Kadhim et al. (2024) reinforce this view, describing CSR as a catalyst for Iraq's socio-economic development and an indispensable element of sustainable development.

Collectively, these perspectives suggest that CSR is not merely a mechanism for addressing social inequalities and poverty, but also a central driver in achieving broader sustainable development goals.

Vargas Merino and Rios Lama (2023) highlight a clear connection between CSR and sustainable development, emphasizing that both concepts center on the efficient and sustainable allocation of resources. They argue that firms can contribute to sustainable development through various approaches, including corporate philanthropy, charitable initiatives, improved production processes, promotion of labor equity, provision of decent jobs, economic growth, adoption of environmentally friendly technologies, and responsible use of natural resources. Building on this, Mirza et al. (2024) stress the importance of adopting targeted strategies to ensure that corporate efforts are both sustainable and effective in alleviating poverty. Supporting this view, Zhang and Hao (2024) contend that CSR has evolved from a primarily philanthropic endeavor to a strategic imperative. Ashurov et al. (2024), using a bibliometric analysis, found that CSR is increasingly perceived as an essential element of corporate value creation and a key driver of sustainable development. They recommend embedding CSR more deeply into corporate strategy and operations. Similarly, Milhem et al. (2024) affirm that CSR initiatives positively influence sustainable development by addressing critical environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Jaroensombut et al. (2025) conclude that by tackling these interconnected issues, companies not only advance sustainable development but also enhance their relationships with communities.

Understanding the effectiveness of CSR in advancing sustainable development and promoting social welfare is essential—not only for academics and business leaders, but also for policymakers and other stakeholders committed to building a more equitable and sustainable future. Li et al. (2025) observe that corporate engagement in sustainable development is attracting growing attention from both scholars and policymakers. In a related study, Gallardo-Vázquez et al. (2024) examine the integration of sustainability concepts into the curricula of higher education institutions (HEIs), finding that such initiatives have significant practical implications for businesses, educational institutions, and society as a whole. However, Ntoutoume (2024) argues for the development of Africa-specific CSR strategies, criticizing the voluntary approach as largely ineffective. He advocates for a shift toward mandatory CSR frameworks, suggesting that current CSR practices in Africa fall short of delivering sustainable outcomes.

Rathobei et al. (2024) argue that for businesses to meaningfully contribute to sustainable development, they must integrate social and environmental considerations into both their core operations and voluntary stakeholder engagements. Embedding CSR into the strategic foundation of the firm, according to Milhem et al. (2024), not only enhances long-term profitability but also builds stakeholder trust, delivers social benefits, and promotes sustainable development. However, Salam (2024) cautions that many CSR initiatives lack long-term impact, particularly when sustainability planning is absent. To maximize their contribution to sustainable development, firms must invest in CSR initiatives that are in line with and actively support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), even when their primary intent is to boost corporate social performance. Overall, the evidence suggests that CSR and sustainable development are

inherently interconnected, with CSR serving as a critical mechanism for advancing sustainable outcomes.

### **2.2.3 Sustainable Development versus CSR of Private Firms**

“One of the functions of this concept is not to be informative but persuasive, not to “tell it like it is” but to ‘tell it like you want people to believe it to be’ or ‘like they want to hear it’...” (Alexander, 2015; Alexander, 2010, p. 42). This assertion, based on the findings of this study summarizes the original intent of private firms’ CSR engagement with sustainable development. In line with this submission, Zervoudi et al., 2025; and Bernard (2015, p. 36) contend that environmental or CSR reports of private firms often serve as a form of “green marketing” being a part of their business plans to improve their reputation; noting further that “firms adopt the ‘weak sustainability’ hinged on environment, economy and society (three pillar model) of sustainability while articulating and executing CSR aims and practices. Hence, to prevent the exploitation of rising stakeholder demands for sustainability, firms should align their CSR initiatives with the principles of sustainable development—emphasizing a balanced integration of environmental, economic, and social objectives in line with the triple bottom line approach.

According to Laine's (2005) examination of Finnish corporate disclosures, private companies' CSR reports portray sustainable development as a win-win situation. Further, Laine (2005, p. 402) maintain that there are four meanings attached to sustainable development in Finnish reports:

(i) economic growth and sustainable development may coexist, and sustainable development is promoted as a means of resolving social and environmental issues without

restricting economic progress of the firm; (ii) sustainable development is portrayed as a voluntary action undertaken by all parties with responsibility; (iii) the Finnish studies downplay the complexity of sustainable development, reducing it to a straightforward procedure that can be readily accomplished by adhering to certain guidelines; and (iv) it is claimed that achieving sustainable development is totally feasible under the current economic system and without institutional or economic reform. Additionally, the terms "sustainable development" and "eco-efficiency" or "environmental management" are frequently confused by managers (Laine, 2005, p. 399).

Johansen and Nielsen (2024) and Bernard (2015) observe that firms often conceptualize sustainable development as a synergistic integration of economic objectives, environmental protection, and community engagement. Within this framework, sustainable development is frequently portrayed as a win-win strategy—one that supports economic growth while simultaneously addressing social and environmental challenges without imposing limits on profitability.

According to Kamara (2020) rethinking economic growth as well as the social and environmental benefits that accrue when businesses address social challenges, such as when they give back to society through CSR that resonates with social justice and community development, marks the foundation of sustainable development discourse. For Conteh and Maconachie (2019) cited in Kamara (2020), despite the vagueness of the term "sustainable development," it is frequently used in corporate strategy and operations to promote more cordial and long-lasting connections between organizations and other stakeholders. Indeed, for a private company to maintain a cordial interaction with its

stakeholders while advancing the principles of sustainable development, a well-executed CSR becomes vitally crucial. This argument is in line with the position that sustainable development is a method of corporate growth that meets the needs of an organization and its stakeholders in the present while preserving and improving the natural and human resources that will be required in the future (WBCSD, 2001).

Further, Blowfield and Murray (2014) argue that a corporate approach to sustainable development should promote the equitable distribution of quality of life across the global population. Achieving this vision of socio-economic justice requires addressing persistent challenges such as social inequality, poverty, weak governance, climate change, and inadequate education systems—issues that are particularly acute in Global South countries, including Nigeria.

#### **2.2.4 Criticism of CSR**

In this contemporary time, there have been a back-and-forth argument on business involvement with CSR. While some practitioners have advocated for corporate commitment to CSR, others have vehemently stood against businesses engaging with CSR activities.

For instance, Milton Friedman in Carroll and Shabana (2010) insisted that corporations should primarily care about making money for their shareholders, and people but no businesses should be tasked with the moral responsibility for their acts. Friedman further argued that while social issues are the responsibility of the state, not corporations, managers have a responsibility to operate only in the interests of shareholders. In other

words, the unrestricted operation of the free-market system should be used to solve societal issues and not through involvement of businesses using CSR.

Similarly, Henderson (2001) contends that CSR or global corporate citizenship pose great danger to businesses, therefore, corporate managers should not make a special effort to win over anti-business organizations or promote poorly thought-out enterprises in the name of CSR. He maintained that the adoption of CSR does not in any wise amount to responsible business conduct and therefore, reiterated that corporate endorsement of dubious concepts like "sustainable development" and the "triple bottom line" is neither required nor wise (Henderson, 2001, p. 31). This shareholders' model position has largely contributed to why most companies' CSR efforts are instrumentalist-oriented, a bid to focus more on the business case than the ethical responsibilities as a corporate entity.

Further, many private sector firms (PSFs) have been accused of engaging in greenwashing—a practice that, according to Zervoudi et al. (2025), involves misrepresenting or exaggerating sustainability initiatives to mislead stakeholders. Greer and Bruno (1996) argue that such practices amount to little more than public relations rhetoric, as corporations often portray themselves as environmental champions or leaders in the fight against poverty and environmental degradation while masking their true impact. Despite the widely publicized CSR projects that claim to contribute to environmental sustainability, these firms have been heavily criticized for creating a false impression of meaningful progress while neglecting the deeper structural causes of environmental and developmental challenges (Zervoudi et al., 2025; Bhagat, 2024; Greer & Bruno, 1996). In light of these criticisms, firms must move beyond the façade of “green

marketing” and demonstrate genuine accountability and transparency in their sustainability practices.

### **2.2.5 Advocacy for CSR**

For Friedman (1962) and Henderson (2001), business and politics should be clearly separated from each another. It is apparent that Friedman and Henderson oppose contemporary CSR ideas. However, several studies have shown a correlation between CSR and businesses. According to Visser (2011, p. 5) Griffin and Mahon (1997) reviewed 25 years of studies and found that a majority showed a positive link between CSR and financial performance. To this end, numerous scholars and practitioners in the field of corporate social responsibility (CSR) have emphasized its value, advocating that it is not only beneficial but essential for organizations to be socially responsible. Kadhim et al. (2024) maintain that CSR is a catalyst for socio-economic development, while Jaroensombut et al. (2025) highlight its potential to advance sustainable development and foster stronger community relationships with the firm. Similarly, Rathobei et al. (2024) argue that businesses must integrate social and environmental considerations into both their operations and voluntary stakeholder engagements to stay relevant to the community. Saputra and Hanutama (2025) further recommend that CSR should be embedded within corporate communication strategies to enhance stakeholder relations. Milhem et al. (2024) support this view, noting that CSR initiatives strengthen brand reputation, build stakeholder trust, and promote long-term business growth. In addition, Aguinis et al. (2024) and Ndong (2023) assert that businesses, as key CSR actors, have the capacity to address significant societal challenges. However, a more critical perspective is offered by Khurshid et al. (2025) and Fu et al. (2023), who caution that despite the rhetoric of

sustainability, some CSR activities have paradoxically contributed to environmental degradation, underscoring the need for more authentic and accountable CSR practices.

Further, Kramer and Porter (2011) argue that companies should invest in CSR as part of their business plan to become more competitive because it is a responsibility they have to society. In the same line of thought is Bernstein in Carroll and Shabana (2010) when he made the submission that for reasons that the public overwhelmingly favours CSR, companies should participate in it; stating further that the general public believes that businesses should be accountable to their employees, communities, and other stakeholders in addition to their pursuit of profits, even if doing so means forgoing some financial gain.

Seele and lock (2015, p. 403) and Scherer and Palazzo (2011, p. 899) also note that companies participate in global public policy, assuming a "new political role" as "global corporate citizens." According to this perspective, businesses operate under a more expansive notion of duty and assist in resolving society problems in collaboration with societal actors, or stakeholders. More and more firms are handling issues through self-regulatory activities that once fell under the purview of state regulations (Seele and lock, 2015). Other proponents of CSR including Attig et al. (2013); Blowfield and Frynas (2005), etc have affirmed that indeed, CSR pay off for business in the long run.

### **2.2.6 CSR and Environmental Concerns**

The social and environmental impacts of corporate activities have been extensively scrutinized, with growing expectations from stakeholders and the broader public for companies to account for the wider consequences of their operations (Vargas Merino & Rios Lama, 2023). In response, firms are increasingly adopting strategies aimed at

enhancing their public image and minimizing environmental harm. Jaroensombut et al. (2025) note that companies are implementing measures such as complying with carbon emissions regulations, improving energy efficiency, and investing in renewable energy sources to mitigate their contributions to climate change. Khurshid et al. (2025) and Fu et al. (2023) further assert that growing environmental degradation has intensified stakeholder pressure on firms to prioritize environmental sustainability. A prominent example lies in the operations of multinational oil companies—such as Shell, ExxonMobil, Agip, TotalEnergies, Chevron, and BP—which, while generating substantial profits through resource extraction, often produce severe negative externalities. These include social and environmental damages to host communities, contributing to persistent poverty and malnutrition (Salam, 2024). Consequently, Saenz (2024) emphasizes the importance of firms effectively managing their stakeholder relationships—including addressing their social and environmental responsibilities—as a means of fostering sustainable community engagement and long-term legitimacy.

Ashurov et al. (2024) and Rahman and Wallace Hadrill (2022) observe that environmental performance metrics have evolved beyond basic resource consumption to include broader concerns such as carbon footprints and sustainable practices. Khurshid et al. (2025) and Fu et al. (2023) further emphasize that the integration of environmentally friendly innovations is essential for advancing ecological sustainability within corporate strategies. Although the socioeconomic aspects of CSR remain critical, environmental concerns have increasingly taken center stage in both corporate and governmental agendas, prompting interdisciplinary scholarly inquiry. In a recent study, Aji and Damak (2025) highlight critical environmental challenges in Nigeria through their study on CSR-driven public–

private partnerships (PPPs). They note that the country's ecological footprint continues to grow due to a combination of economic expansion and persistent poverty. However, the study underscores the potential of well-structured PPPs and increased adoption of renewable energy to mitigate these adverse impacts. Their findings suggest that CSR strategies which deliberately incorporate clean energy solutions, sustainable waste management practices, community-based environmental education, and targeted media campaigns can significantly enhance long-term ecological sustainability.

Le et al. (2024) examined the relationship between corporate sustainable development and CSR using structural equation modeling. Their findings reveal a significant positive relationship, demonstrating that CSR directly influences corporate sustainable development, with environmental strategy and biodegradable innovation acting as key mediating factors. Similarly, Khurshid et al. (2025) analyzed the interplay between CSR, environmental governance (EG), and green innovation (GI), concluding that CSR positively impacts innovation, particularly in state-owned and high-pollution sectors. Zhou et al. (2024) also explored the link between CSR and environmental performance, showing that CSR not only has a direct positive effect on environmental outcomes but also operates through mediators such as green innovation.

Firms are increasingly aware that maintaining strong relationships with the community requires effective management of stakeholder interests as well as their social and environmental impacts. CSR-driven environmental sustainability initiatives often involve adopting practices that minimize ecological harm and promote efficient resource use. To achieve holistic success, firms must generate value not only for shareholders but also for

a broad spectrum of stakeholders, particularly by mitigating risks to human health and the environment (Le et al., 2024). Pouresmaieli et al. (2024) emphasize the necessity of proactive environmental actions to advance sustainable development. Similarly, Emeka-Okoli et al. (2024) and Shafait and Pan (2025) argue that meaningful collaboration with stakeholders is essential—not only as a means of creating shared value and addressing socio-environmental challenges but also as a globally recognized CSR practice that supports broader ecosystem resilience.

### **2.2.6 (i). CSR and the “Green” Concept**

Attention is gradually shifting from the concept of what Visser (2011, p. 8) called “CSR 1.0 – the classic notion of ‘Corporate Social Responsibility’ to a new, integrated conception – CSR 2.0, labelled as ‘Corporate Sustainability and Responsibility’...” (Visser, 2011, p. 8). His concept of CSR 2.0 has a direct link with environmental sustainability which entails the obligation to protect global ecosystems and conserve natural resources in order to sustain health and welfare both now and in the future. The environmental sustainability is also conceptualized by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as well as the United Nations (2023) as meeting today's requirements while preserving future generations' capacity to satisfy their own needs (Sphera.com., 2022; Ilemona, 2020; Renewed, 2006). Thus, the whole essence of the environmental sustainability concept revolves around understanding and finding solutions to the ecological society and environmental related issue in order to have a more friendly environment; water and air free from toxic substances for now and future use, which corporations have a lot at stake.

According to Visser (2011, p. 2) one could argue that CSR of firms should not be cumbered with the mandate to address these difficult social, environmental, and ethical issues, because it is not capable of doing so. Certainly, business cannot address the world's problems on its own, but what good is CSR if it does not truly aim to address the issues and reverse the negative trends? In other words, what happens if the environment is compromised due to companies' nefarious activities directly or indirectly? As Banerjee (2008) noted, while a company's ability to make money is undeniable and may not be compromised, some of its economic, social, and environmental effects are undeniably negative. To this effect, there is a call to action for firms to show public concern for the environment, particularly when their activities tend to upset the ecosystem and environment in general.

Kamara (2020) notes that indeed, by offering greater wages than local businesses, MNCs can play a significant part in boosting employment standards, infrastructural development, and a higher standard of living in the host countries. However, Greer and Bruno (1996) argued that giant corporations' efforts to persuade the public that they have entered a new era of "green business" have included a focus on international political events. They argued further that this greenwashing by corporations is merely public relations rhetoric and that by portraying themselves as champions of the environment and leaders in the fight to abolish poverty, businesses are taking control of the global economy and safeguarding and growing their markets. Thus, they maintained that transnational corporations (TNCs) have not significantly altered their environmental conduct in this new period, despite claims to the contrary, and they are not the world's environmental or impoverished people's saviours. Actually, these companies have continued to be the

principal producers and distributors of risky, harmful, and unsustainable technologies. For the benefit of the earth and its inhabitants, it is necessary to thoroughly examine the claims made by these corporations in order to regulate their operations and goods (Greer and Bruno, 1996; Klein, 2016). It is noteworthy that researches such as the one undertaken by Zervoudi et al. (2025) are used to verify some of the claims made by businesses and understand the real motivation behind CSR of corporations, particularly towards green marketing campaigns.

Greer and Bruno (1996) acknowledge that the government at some levels are accomplice to the environmental degradation by retreating from their statutory roles and has left a power void that businesses are scrambling to fill. It is also on this same note that Barnett and Cavanagh in Greer and Bruno (1996), opine that national governments' ability to control the behavior of multinational corporations operating on their soil is waning due to a decline in their political clout and technological capabilities. As a result, an ideological shift has occurred that elevates this reality in environmental sustainability leading to the Earth Summit being tagged greenwash; in the words of Greer and Bruno, “The Earth Summit itself was greenwash on a grand scale because it gave the false impression that important, positive change was occurring and failed to alert the world to the root causes of environment and development problems” (Greer and Bruno, 1996, p. 24). Therefore, efforts must be made for corporations to come clean of these accusations of living in their paradise of green marketing— “an attempt to associate its products, services or identity with environmental values and images... in order to promote the sales of products, to enhance a company’s image or to facilitate image repair...” (Cox 2013, p. 335). Green marketing is a form of marketing technique where the environment or corporation's

affiliation with the environment take center stage. The main objective of green marketing is to boost sales while also enhancing brand awareness (Cox 2013, p. 337). Simply, explained, green marketing is a form of advertisements incorporated into corporate policies as a claim to be helping to redeem the environment from degradation.

### **2.2.7 CSR, Sustainable Development and Development Communication**

The concepts of sustainability, corporate sustainability, sustainable development (SD), CSR, and corporate responsibility all refer to the analysis of a firm's relationship with a wider range of stakeholders (Jeremiah, 2017). Allen-Taylor (2022) contend that CSR is commonly regarded as a dynamic principle fostering sustainable development. Consequently, the implementation of CSR by corporate firms ought to yield a commendable ethical standing conducive to sustainability.

According to the international ISO 26000 Guidance Standard on Social Responsibility in Kovačić (2015, p. 24), "the objective of social responsibility is to contribute to sustainable development", this is equally applicable to CSR strategies and practices. The prevailing understanding of sustainable development is primarily derived from the definition outlined in the influential report of the UN Brundtland Commission. According to this definition, sustainable development is: "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Kovačić, 2015, p. 25; Omekwu, et al., 2023, p. 626). Therefore, one of the primary objectives of this study is to investigate how communication, as an empowerment tool, is employed by Private Sector Firms (PSFs) to encourage people's involvement in development initiatives within the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria.

Wilkins and Mody (2006) define development communication as a strategic intervention process aimed at instigating social change, driven by both organizations and communities. This underscores the vital role firms play in advancing a people's developmental agenda, as effective communication is indispensable for any developmental endeavor to flourish. This position echoes Ibuot et al. (2021), who argue that development communication goes beyond mere individual behavior modification, it entails facilitating sustainable social change within communities. They emphasize that participatory development communication empowers local community members to engage in discussions about and address issues like natural resource management, thereby fostering an improved policy environment. Similarly, Huesca (2008) asserts that development communication involves the use of diverse communication strategies, tools, and methodologies to promote social, economic, and political progress at both community and state levels. According to the World Bank, cited in Tufte and Mefalopulos (2009), development communication involves the integration of strategic communication into development projects. Strategic communication serves as a potent tool for enhancing the success of private sector firms in executing development initiatives for local communities. This approach to development aims at inducing behavioral changes rather than merely disseminating information, educating, or raising awareness. While awareness campaigns are essential components of communication, they alone are insufficient to foster sustainable development (Odoom, 2020).

When Private Sector Firms (PSFs) engage in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives that advocate for social justice, foster community development, and tackle prevalent social issues, they significantly contribute to the entrenchment of sustainable

development within the system. This entails accruing economic growth and delivering social and environmental benefits to community members. Melkote and Steeves (2015) framed development communication within the realm of social justice and empowerment. Echoing this stance, Odoom (2020) and Ibuot et al. (2021) emphasized the indispensability of equality and social justice in meaningful development endeavours.

Consequently, reducing inequality and eradicating absolute poverty hinge on the effective application of human communication to expedite people's transformation. Development here is seen to include economic growth, equality, social justice, and socio-economic transformations, all operating on a self-sustaining basis. Essentially, when participatory communication facilitates the transition of individuals from poverty to dynamic economic growth, it fosters greater social equality and fulfills human potential to a greater extent.

The social interaction process emerges as an essential element of development communication since human interaction catalyzes the swift transformation of citizens from poverty to economic prosperity. In this context, societal development relies on the exchange of ideas, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviours among individuals, constituting the pathway for societies to evolve and thrive, particularly for the transformation agenda in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria.

Moreover, drawing from the strategic communication approaches of the World Bank and IMF, Mozammel in Mefalopoulos (2008) illustrated how a bidirectional flow of information among local community members can establish a public forum conducive to an informed and inclusive national dialogue to combat poverty challenges. This

underscores the pivotal roles of inclusivity and participation in realizing sustainable development goals.

Consequently, it is imperative to ensure the effective engagement of stakeholders by prioritizing a grassroots approach to development communication. This involves creating communication strategies and messages that resonate with and are easily comprehensible to community members while being adaptable to local cultural, social, and linguistic contexts.

Integrating continuous feedback loops and evaluation mechanisms into the development communication process is essential for assessing the efficacy of communication strategies, gathering community insights, and making necessary adjustments to enhance outcomes that ultimately contribute to sustainable development.

The preceding discussion underscores that principles of development communication involve participatory action, inclusivity, and behavior change aimed at equity and human potential enhancement. Furthermore, effective communication strategies in development entail the judicious use of appropriate channels and techniques to boost grassroots-level participation, motivation, and training. Thus, the significance of knowledge and information dissemination as a development communication principle for advertently addressing social, economic, cultural, political, and technological shifts cannot be overemphasized. In essence, development communication principles center on empowering marginalized groups, nurturing dialogue, and advancing sustainable development through tailored communication strategies (Fernández-Aballí Altamirano,

2020; Melkote and Steeves, 2015; Mefalopulos, 2008; Wilkins and Mody, 2006; Servaes, 2003).

Consequently, this study underscores the potential of CSR in fostering sustainable development in Nigeria's Middle Belt region, with a specific emphasis on the importance for private sector firms to reconsider participatory communication as a key CSR strategy. As noted by Purvis et al. (2019), the conceptualization of sustainable development hinges on core principles of nurturing social interaction and preserving the environment. Similarly, the manner in which communities receive and interpret messages holds significance for businesses, as it necessitates dialogue among CSR stakeholders. Therefore, development communication emerges as an integral component and driving force in this conceptualization, as it constitutes one of the techniques and strategies employed to facilitate social, economic, and political development within societies (Purvis et al., 2019).

Hence, the importance of empowering marginalized groups and cultivate community dialogue to advance sustainable development through tailored communication strategies, using CSR initiatives of PSFs, cannot be overemphasized in realizing the development agenda of the region.



Figure 2.1 Nexus between CSR, Sustainable Development and Development Communication

Figure 2.1 above shows the interconnection among the three key variables: corporate social responsibility, sustainable development and development communication.

### **2.2.8 CSR and Participatory Communication**

Optimal outcomes from CSR initiatives are more likely when firms co-create these efforts with stakeholders—especially within the African context, where collectivist cultural values tend to support collaborative engagement more effectively than the individualistic tendencies common in Western societies. Supporting this view, Masuku (2024) asserts that stakeholder collaboration and innovation are crucial for enhancing organizational-community relationships, offering mutual benefits that promote sustainable development for future generations. Emeka-Okoli et al. (2024) further emphasize that transparency, dialogue, and collaboration are essential communication strategies for effective CSR and stakeholder engagement. They argue that open and continuous communication builds trust, manages stakeholder expectations, and reflects a company's genuine commitment to social responsibility. Reinforcing this perspective, Kloppers and Fourie's (2018) study on

CSR and sustainable development found that participatory communication—grounded in principles of dialogue, participation, cultural identity, and empowerment—remains a normative model for driving social change. Based on qualitative interviews, their findings suggest that empowering local communities through skills training, mentorship, and technical support enhances meaningful participation and facilitates more impactful community development outcomes.

Further, several studies—such as those by Saputra and Hanutama (2025), Bhagat (2024), and Wanjue (2023)—highlight the “Stakeholder Involvement Model,” which advocates for the co-creation of CSR initiatives with stakeholders, rather than unidirectional communication. These studies demonstrate that when consumers, employees, and local communities are actively engaged in shaping CSR efforts, such initiatives are perceived as more authentic and impactful. This can be achieved through a balanced approach that both informs the public and fosters two-way dialogue. In a similar vein, Milhem et al. (2024) and Musakophas and Polnigongit (2017) underscore the importance of CSR strategies that are localized, innovative, and stakeholder-oriented. Ebekoziem et al. (2025) further argue that government participation is essential not only for the sustainability and execution of CSR projects by private sector firms, but also for ensuring inclusive stakeholder engagement through participatory communication frameworks within host communities. Saenz (2024) supports this view, suggesting that the formation of participatory environmental monitoring committees can significantly strengthen stakeholder relations. Additionally, Robert et al. (2025) emphasize that effective stakeholder management is intricately linked with key dimensions of CSR, such as social responsibility, community engagement, and the social license to operate—each of which

relies on transparent, ongoing dialogue. Collectively, these perspectives point to the necessity of participatory governance mechanisms to earn community trust, enhance legitimacy, and drive long-term CSR success.

### **2.2.9 CSR and Social Concerns**

The growing awareness of corporate social responsibility has created new avenues for businesses to contribute meaningfully to global social challenges (Salam, 2024). Ashurov et al. (2024) and Rahman and Wallace Hadrill (2022) note that the social dimensions of CSR have expanded beyond traditional community engagement to include employee well-being, diversity, equity, and ethical labor practices. In their exploration of CSR's alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Ashurov et al. (2024) argue that CSR must evolve beyond philanthropic gestures to encompass the integration of environmental and social considerations into the core strategies of businesses. This underscores the notion that the future effectiveness of CSR in advancing the SDG agenda relies on the extent to which firms embed social responsibility into their strategic operations, thereby promoting a more just and sustainable global economy. Further contributing to this discourse, Aguinis et al. (2024) and Ntoutoume (2024) emphasize that businesses, as CSR agents, play a key role in addressing society's grand challenges. Their research outlines six key dimensions of CSR: economic, social, ethical, stakeholder-oriented, sustainable, and voluntary. Complementing this perspective, Zhang and Hao (2024) offer a comprehensive analysis of CSR and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) performance across Asian economies. Their systematic review highlights emerging priorities such as renewable energy adoption, ethical corporate conduct, employee engagement, and data privacy protection; underscoring the importance of socio-environmental concerns.

Therefore, to enhance the impact of corporate efforts on sustainable development, businesses must adopt a more collaborative and integrated approach to CSR—one in which environmental sustainability, social equity, and governance accountability are embedded at the core of corporate strategy rather than treated as peripheral concerns. Rathobei et al. (2024) argue that addressing societal challenges often requires meaningful engagement with local communities, whose interests may be diverse and at times conflicting. In response, firms should pursue strategies that identify shared values among stakeholder groups and foster mutually beneficial outcomes. Awa et al. (2024) similarly advocate for a redefinition of corporate responsibilities—calling on businesses to integrate socio-economic and environmental considerations into their core operations to transparently and sustainably impact society. Supporting this perspective, Pouresmaieli et al. (2024) find that while CSR has a positive influence on economic and environmental indicators, its most significant impact lies in the social domain. However, Bian et al. (2025) caution that neglecting community engagement and stakeholder inclusion can result in rising tensions and potential conflict, especially in host communities. De Souza Barbosa et al. (2023) therefore recommend integrating the ESG framework into CSR practices to bolster overall corporate sustainability performance.

Despite growing attention to organizational and environmental aspects, the social dimension—particularly stakeholder perspectives—remains relatively underexplored. Ashurov et al. (2024) underscore this gap by highlighting the real-world challenges of making CSR strategies effective in promoting social welfare and sustainable development. Consequently, this study calls for a stronger emphasis on socially driven CSR initiatives aimed at alleviating poverty, reducing unemployment, and expanding access to quality

education, especially in under-resourced regions such as the Global South and Africa in particular.

### **2.2.10 CSR and Ethical Concerns**

The practice of Corporate Social Responsibility remains largely abstract, inconsistent, and often instrumental rather than authentically moral—particularly in the African context, where private sector firms tend to prioritize managerial rhetoric and mere compliance with economic or legal standards over genuine ethical or philanthropic responsibility. This disconnect from actionable ethical norms significantly undermines the capacity of firms to address pressing moral and societal challenges (Mbu Ogar, 2021; Jamali and Karam, 2018; Windsor, 2006). As such, there is a critical need to foreground principles of honesty, transparency, and fairness in the planning and implementation of CSR initiatives, especially in company-community relations. Ashurov et al. (2024), in their bibliometric analysis, note that CSR is often used as a branding or marketing tool rather than as an expression of genuine moral obligation, casting doubt on the ethical credibility of many CSR claims. Their study advocates for embedding CSR within the core strategic framework of businesses, recognizing its potential to simultaneously promote environmental sustainability and economic progress. Similarly, Ackers (2015) and Camilleri (2024) caution that when CSR is approached merely as a compliance mechanism—especially under regulatory or technological pressures—it loses its transformative potential and fails to advance societal well-being. Ikejiaku (2012) further contends that some firms misuse CSR to obscure unethical or even illegal practices such as exploitation, deceit, and environmental degradation. In line with this, Ayoko (2022) argues that without ethical leadership grounded in honesty, fairness, and openness to employee voice, CSR remains performative and lacks real developmental impact.

Conversely, organizations that embed CSR into their corporate culture are more likely to foster authentic ethical conduct and meaningful stakeholder engagement. Collectively, these insights underscore that ethical integrity is indispensable to the success of CSR and its contribution to sustainable development.

Furthermore, Onyekwelu et al. (2024) conducted a study on the intersection of corporate CSR, human resource management, and ethics. They emphasize that unless fairness, diversity, and transparency are embedded in recruitment processes—and unless employees and other stakeholders are treated ethically—CSR and HR practices will fall short of becoming genuine drivers of positive change. The study concludes that integrating ethical considerations into HR policies, with a strong focus on diversity, inclusion, and the alignment of HR strategies with broader CSR objectives, lays a solid foundation for responsible and sustainable corporate practices. Similarly, Aguinis et al. (2024) explored the relationships between CSR perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors, arguing that when employees view CSR initiatives as authentic and guided by ethical rather than purely reputational or profit-driven motives, it fosters trust, reinforces ethical norms, and enhances stakeholder engagement. Building on this, Zaitsev et al. (2024) highlight the importance of adopting purposeful business strategies that harmonize technological advancement with equity, data privacy, and environmental responsibility to optimize operations and reinforce long-term sustainability.

Similarly, Fatima and Elbanna's (2023) empirical review of 122 studies reveals that firms often implement CSR activities in isolation, thereby undermining transparency, stakeholder trust, and the moral integrity of their CSR efforts. Supporting this view, a 25-

year systematic review of 119 articles by Nave and Ferreira (2019) highlights that CSR is frequently approached in a fragmented and instrumental manner. Firms tend to pursue CSR initiatives primarily to secure benefits such as sustainability awards, enhanced reputation, or stakeholder approval, rather than to fulfill the ethical responsibilities that underpin true social responsibility—an approach that inadvertently encourages greenwashing and superficial engagement. Carroll (2015) cautions that the broad and often ambiguous application of the CSR concept can result in ethical uncertainty, weakening firms' moral accountability. De Colle et al. (2014) similarly argue that poor implementation of well-intentioned CSR efforts can backfire, leading to symbolic compliance and the use of deceptive performance metrics. Therefore, it is essential that firms exercise caution in the planning and execution of CSR initiatives. Without clear ethical foundations and meaningful internalization, CSR risks becoming a hollow framework—more symbolic than transformative. To earn and sustain public trust, firms must prioritize ethical integrity and transparency at the core of their CSR practices.

### **2.2.11 Public/ Stakeholder Engagement**

Firms today face mounting pressure from an increasingly informed public, alongside stakeholders' demand for deeper involvement in addressing societal challenges and mitigating environmental degradation (Awa et al., 2024). According to Lee and Chung (2023), meaningful engagement with the public allows private sector firms to gain legitimacy and better understand societal expectations, perceptions, and demands related to their CSR initiatives. Similarly, Xu and Woo (2023) highlight that CSR has evolved into a global norm, with firms voluntarily undertaking initiatives to attract public goodwill, build trust, and contribute to societal well-being—underscoring the value of shared benefit in modern business operations. As a result, contemporary corporations are

expected not only to integrate social and environmental concerns into their decision-making processes but also to actively engage a broad spectrum of stakeholders to enhance the effectiveness and authenticity of their CSR efforts. This growing expectation reflects what public relations scholars often describe as responsible “corporate citizenship,” (Moon, Crane, and Matten, 2005; Matten and Crane, 2005); where firms play a critical role in shaping the structures, development, and quality of life within the communities in which they operate.

Stakeholder engagement is a vital pillar of CSR, as emphasized by Emeka-Okoli et al. (2024), who argue that meaningful engagement entails building trust-based relationships, understanding stakeholder needs, and incorporating their feedback into corporate decision-making. Local communities and indigenous groups, in particular, play a crucial role in shaping the outcomes of CSR efforts (Mamo et al., 2023). By engaging these stakeholders, firms can enhance their social license to operate, mitigate reputational and operational risks, and co-create value for all parties involved. Similarly, Dong et al. (2024) assert that private sector firms can advance sustainable development by aligning their CSR initiatives with community needs—thereby achieving both social impact and profitability. From a communication standpoint, Lattimore et al. (2012) maintain that addressing societal concerns is a fundamental aim of corporate public relations. Wilcox et al. (2015) and Irogbo (2024) further emphasize that fostering public support and acceptance is a central goal of corporate communication, highlighting the indispensable role of public relations in CSR practices. In this context, Li et al. (2025) note that stakeholders often respond positively to responsible corporate behavior, contributing unique resources and support that strengthen a firm’s competitive advantage.

Building on the analytical distinction between *business as a development tool* and *business as a development agent*, Idemudia et al. (2022) argue that for CSR to serve as a more effective vehicle for advancing sustainable development in Africa's rural communities, firms must transition from acting merely as tools for development to becoming proactive agents of development. This shift requires reorienting CSR policies and practices to prioritize long-term, community-driven development outcomes. Saenz (2024) support this view by advocating for a sustainability communication approach that moves beyond conventional CSR messaging toward a more integrated and holistic strategy. In line with this, Geysi (2025) emphasizes the importance of managing stakeholder expectations through transparency and genuine dialogue. Therefore, to foster meaningful community development, there is a pressing need to rethink CSR not as the primary lens through which development is viewed, but rather to approach CSR as a function of broader, stakeholder-centered community development efforts.

### **2.2.12 CSR and Community Engagement**

Community engagement involves establishing meaningful communication with local stakeholders to ensure CSR initiatives are responsive to community expectations and concerns. Successful CSR requires not only understanding these expectations but also integrating continuous feedback mechanisms that allow community input to shape CSR strategies. As Jaroensombut et al. (2025) emphasize, community involvement and charitable efforts are integral components of CSR. The importance of cultivating long-term, positive relationships with local communities cannot be overstated, especially since businesses depend on community support for their continued operation (Abbas et al., 2024; Farooq et al., 2014). In line with this, Dzage et al. (2024) argue that corporate responsibility to the community presents an opportunity to assess the social and

environmental impacts of business operations and to implement restorative and quality-of-life-enhancing measures. Abbas (2025) further contends that genuine stakeholder engagement requires moving beyond traditional CSR frameworks and institutional commitments toward more inclusive, civic-oriented approaches that emphasize ethical participation from within the organization. Similarly, Tawiah et al. (2025) stress that CSR initiatives must be consistent, culturally sensitive, and aligned with local development priorities to foster sustained and effective engagement with host communities.

Further, Medina-Muñoz and Medina-Muñoz (2020) outline a comprehensive set of pro-poor CSR practices that promote community development through meaningful engagement. These include initiatives such as local capacity building, community empowerment, educational support (e.g., school construction and scholarship programs), employment creation, income generation for local farmers, promotion of entrepreneurship and local businesses, infrastructure development (including electricity, potable water, roads, and clinics), microfinance and access to capital, as well as improved access to legal systems and social networks. Through these measures, firms can contribute to sustainable development by stimulating local economic growth via job creation, investment, and tax revenue. However, the authors caution that such growth often lacks inclusivity, reflecting inadequate community engagement in these initiatives. Supporting this, Onyekwelu et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of fair recruitment practices and training programs targeted at community members to enhance genuine engagement. These perspectives affirm the positive correlation between CSR and social performance. However, Salam (2024) notes that relationships between companies and local communities are frequently marked by mistrust—particularly in matters concerning environmental management and

stakeholder welfare. To address this, Jaroensombut et al. (2025) advocate for CSR initiatives that prioritize the well-being of local citizens as a means to enhance public perception and strengthen firm-community relationships.

Zervoudi et al. (2025) argue that while Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) frameworks are instrumental in aligning corporate activities with the principles of environmental sustainability, social equity, and governance accountability, they can also inadvertently facilitate greenwashing—where companies misrepresent or exaggerate their sustainability efforts to mislead stakeholders. To combat this, the authors advocate for a multi-stakeholder approach that emphasizes the need for genuine ESG implementation, transparent reporting mechanisms, and measurable environmental outcomes as prerequisites for fostering meaningful community engagement. In this regard, Saenz (2024) emphasizes that effective community engagement not only enables firms to better understand and respond to local concerns but also strengthens stakeholder relationships and generates mutual benefits for both the company and the host communities. More importantly, meaningful engagement requires firms to go beyond symbolic gestures by actively investing in community welfare through infrastructure development, support for educational programs, and the provision of healthcare services.

### **2.2.13 Appropriateness of CSR initiatives and Inclusivity**

The failure of many CSR initiatives can often be traced to firms' inability to accurately understand stakeholders' expectations and to align project choices with the actual needs of the communities they serve. As such, corporate social responsibility decisions and actions should be driven not by corporate image enhancement but by a genuine commitment to addressing societal needs. Osagie (2017) and Adekola and Uzoagu (2012)

argue that involving stakeholders or community representatives in the decision-making process is crucial, as their insights can guide the selection of projects that are both relevant and impactful, thereby advancing broader developmental goals. Supporting this view, Adamolekun and Ogedengbe (2020) submit that a firm's capacity to positively affect the lives of community members is a fundamental determinant of its long-term success.

Again, Scherer et al. (2013) argue that organizations are held in high regard when their actions are perceived as meeting societal expectations regarding socio-economic and environmental responsibilities, thereby contributing to sustainable development. However, Hahn et al. (2024) caution that CSR initiatives can become "contested," particularly when their objectives or implementation methods diverge from stakeholder needs and expectations. Such misalignment may result in stakeholder disengagement or, in more severe cases, conflict and disconnection between the firm and its host community. In a related study, Zhang, Xu, and Chen (2024) explore how perceived legitimacy influences stakeholder support for CSR initiatives. Their findings highlight that the effectiveness of CSR communication—especially when endorsed by social media influencers—significantly affects stakeholders' perception of legitimacy. When influencers exhibit strong opinion leadership and taste authority, they enhance the normative legitimacy of CSR efforts, making them appear more aligned with prevailing social values. This endorsement fosters trust and increases stakeholders' willingness to support CSR initiatives. Therefore, the perceived appropriateness of CSR is shaped not only by its substantive content but also by how credibly and authentically it is communicated, particularly through influencer-mediated channels that resonate with stakeholder values.

Further, Ahmad et al. (2024) emphasize that CSR must move beyond generic philanthropic gestures toward authentic, strategic, and purpose-driven initiatives that align with community needs and broader sustainability goals to realize its full impact. Similarly, Ha et al. (2024) found that CSR efforts linked to customer-centric services and environmental responsibility tend to be significantly more effective than those focused on broad, abstract social causes. They argue that strategically aligning CSR initiatives with stakeholder expectations—such as environmentally sustainable practices or customer-focused services—yields stronger engagement and outcomes, whereas generalized efforts may fail to resonate. In contrast, Opoku Marfo’s (2024) study on CSR behavior in Ghana found no significant positive correlation between partnerships and effective CSR engagement. The study revealed that when firms pursue performative or poorly aligned CSR initiatives without genuine community participation, such efforts often lack impact, sustainability, and meaningful societal benefit.

Inclusivity is a core principle closely tied to effective community engagement. For CSR initiatives to be truly impactful, firms must take inclusion seriously by actively involving members of their host communities in the decision-making process—particularly when determining which CSR projects should be prioritized or implemented. This participatory approach ensures that CSR efforts are in line with stakeholder interests, thereby increasing their relevance and effectiveness. Elkington (2018) argues that sustainable and inclusive business models create win-win outcomes for both businesses and society. Building on this view, Kamara (2022) submits that fostering inclusive stakeholder relationships enables a shared understanding of pressing developmental challenges, which in turn strengthens the social, environmental, and economic dimensions of sustainability in a

holistic manner. Therefore, it is well established that the long-term success of any CSR initiative hinges on how well it connects with the genuine needs and expectations of the community it seeks to serve.

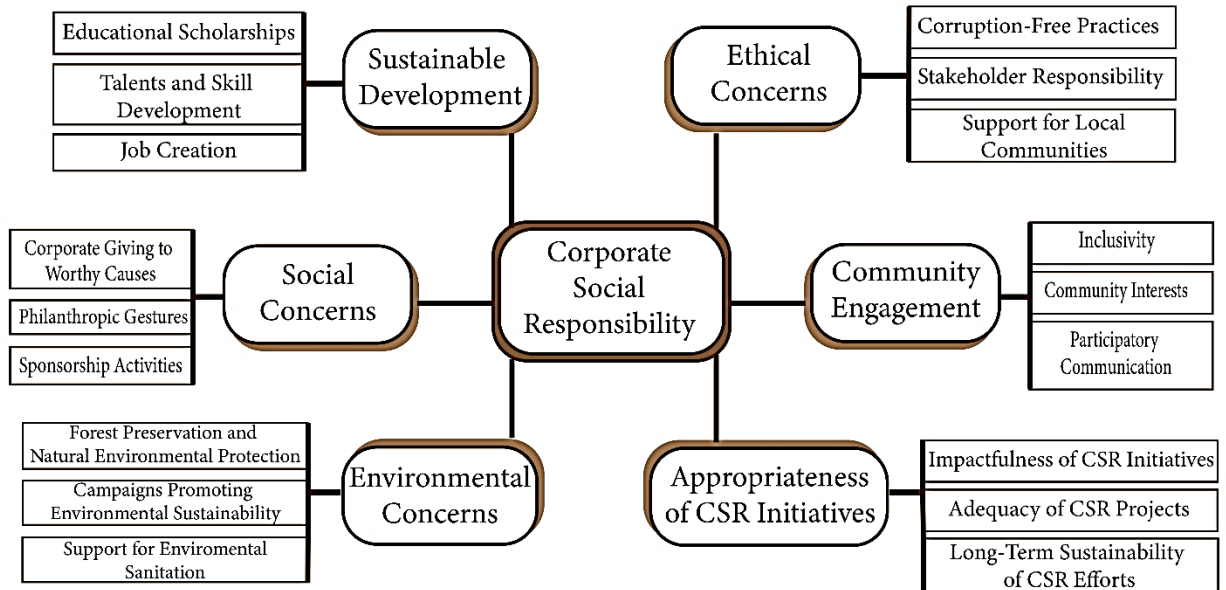


Figure 2.2 Conceptual Model

Figure 2.2 above provides an overview of the key constructs derived from the study’s theoretical foundations and empirical evidence. This model, grounded in existing literature, informs the research design and elucidates the theoretical framework and rationale underpinning the study’s structure.

## **2.3 Theoretical Perspectives Guiding the Study**

### **2.3.1 Overview**

According to Odoom (2020), Communication plays a pivotal role in every development endeavour. Beyond merely empowering individuals, it serves to foster community engagement in developmental undertakings. Specifically, citizens depend on access to knowledge and information to effectively navigate the complexities of social, economic, cultural, political, and technological shifts. Consequently, development communication emerges as a vital component in driving sustainable development initiatives forward. In the context of this study, development communication entails the strategic use of communication methods within development programs to promote both social progress and environmental sustainability.

Albeit, the Participatory model have come to dominate development arena inspite of other diverse communication approaches in contemporary society (Servaes, 2022; Prakash Subedi and Karki, 2022; Widhagdha and Gumilang, 2019; Polk and Servaes, 2015; Tufte and Mefalopulos, 2009; Srampickal, 2006; Servaes and Malikhao, 2005). This assertion informs the choice of the *Participatory Communication Theory* in addition to the *Corporate Social Responsibility Theory* and *Stakeholder Theory*, forming the theoretical framework upon which this study is anchored.

### **2.3.2 Corporate Social Responsibility Theory**

Howard Bowen, the American Economist, is generally regarded as the father of modern CSR because he was the one that first coined the term “Corporate Social Responsibility” in 1953 (Bowen, 1953; Brin and Nehme, 2019, p. 22). In his work titled: ‘Social Responsibilities of the Businessman’ he gave the definition of CSR as “the obligations of

businessmen to pursue those policies...which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society” (Smartsimple, 2021; Brin and Nehme, 2019, p. 22; Bowen, 1953, p.3). *James Brusseau* on the other hand, was the first to use CSR as a theory when he asserted that any theory of the corporation that emphasizes both the responsibility to make money and the responsibility to interact ethically with the surrounding community is worth consideration (Nehme, 2019).

The notion of CSR theory is therefore, based on adding values to the society by integrating stakeholders and their needs into the institution’s value system (Lund-Durlacher, 2015, p. 4). Further, he argued that an organisation’s success, besides other considerations, comes from its performances that are congruent with societal values and concerns. WBCSD (2001, p. 8) view CSR as an institution's continued commitment to behaving ethically and contributing to economic development by improving the quality of life of the people and society in general. The principle of CSR is therefore seen as one that reflects all forms of activities undertaken by an institution with the inclusion of social and environmental concerns within its framework of operations and interactions with stakeholders while also paying attention to sustainability.

According to Carroll in Nave and Ferreira (2019), CSR theory’s principles encompasses economic, legal, and ethical issues - the need to reflect societal concerns in order to minimize operational and financial limitations on the part of the business (Lund-Durlacher, 2015, p. 4). Dahlsrud (2008, p. 6) maintain that the concept of CSR consistently refers to five dimensions: (a) the environment dimension, (b) the social dimension, (c) the economic dimension, (d) the stakeholder dimension, and (e) the voluntariness dimension.

This position reflects the flexibility in adoption of CSR that fits well into an institution's communicative needs.

Furthermore, Akhigbe and Olokoyo (2019, p. 3) and Nave and Ferreira (2019, p. 885) reiterated that corporate organizations and institutions that impact meaningfully on the public, particularly its stakeholders using CSR activities does not only have the potential for optimum outcome but equally stand better chances of enjoying favorable reputation and positive corporate image perception. A similar understanding was expressed by McWilliams et al, (2016); Kramer and Porter (2011) and Siegel and Vitaliano (2007) when they contend that CSR is a tool that can strategically serve to differentiate a company or institution from every other similar firm by creating values both for the firm and the society.

Given the above scholarly analysis on CSR concept and principles, it makes it overwhelmingly important to consider anchoring the study on CSR theory, because the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria will not only benefit from the practices of CSR but it will also impact maximally on stakeholders through sustainable development and quality of life as enshrined in the UN SDG.

### **2.3.3 Participatory Communication Theory**

Participatory communication can be traced to the founder of participatory action research (PAR), popular education, and critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire (Fernández-Aballí Altamirano, 2020).

Globally, development programs are beginning to be viewed in the light of participatory communication (Mefalopulos, 2003). Therefore, the practice and theory of the concept has become an integral part of the development agenda.

The theory emphasizes active engagement and involvement of both individuals and communities in the developmental process. It acknowledges that development thrives on collaboration, integrating the insights and requirements of those it intends to serve. This method advocates for *inclusive* discussions, community involvement, and the appreciation of indigenous knowledge and skills. According to Ibuot et al. (2021), participatory development communication involves harnessing mass media, traditional methods, and interpersonal channels to empower communities in addressing their development challenges and aspirations. It engages community members, inviting them to actively contribute ideas and collaborate on initiatives aimed at fostering development within their communities. By enabling communities to voice their views and engage in decision-making processes, participatory communication nurtures a sense of ownership and cultivates sustainable development (Tufté and Mefalopulos, 2009; Huesca, 2008; Servaes and Malikhao, 2008; Jacobson, 2003). In this scenario, all stakeholders collaborate collectively to achieve the sustainable development of their communities.

The adoption of participatory communication theory for this study is crucial because it will facilitate the effective and organized use of communication in the pursuit of sustainable development. By doing so, it ensures active participation of the intended beneficiaries at every stage of the development process. Collaborating with PSFs' CSR initiatives further enhances this effort, enabling the identification and execution of suitable

communication strategies and policies aimed at poverty prevention, not only within the local community but also across Nigeria as a whole.

### **2.3.4 Stakeholder Theory**

Stakeholder Theory, originally proposed by Robert Edward Freeman in 1984 (Freeman, 2010), argues that firms should not solely focus on maximizing shareholder value, but must also consider the interests of all stakeholders—such as employees, customers, suppliers, communities, and others who are affected by or have a stake in the organization (Freeman, 2010; Barnea and Rubin, 2010; Kaptein, 2025). This theory is central to contemporary discussions about the societal responsibilities of businesses. It underscores the interdependent relationship between organizations and their broader environments, giving rise to key concepts such as corporate social responsibility and corporate philanthropy (Bonnafeous-Boucher and Rendtorff, 2016). Globally, the stakeholder-inclusive approach has gained traction, with scholars like Masuku (2024) emphasizing its relevance in guiding ethical corporate conduct. Shafait and Pan (2025) further assert that stakeholder theory demands that businesses consistently create and sustain value for diverse stakeholder groups—including employees, consumers, local communities, the natural environment, and business partners—in order to ensure long-term competitiveness and sustainability.

Ady and Zahroh (2024) also emphasize that Stakeholder Theory is particularly relevant in CSR and sustainability research, as it encompasses a company's policies and practices concerning its stakeholders, ethical values, legal obligations, environmental responsibilities, and its overall commitment to community welfare and sustainable development (Strazzullo et al., 2025; Akhter and Hassan, 2024). According to Kadhim et

al. (2024) and Le et al. (2024), long-term corporate success depends on creating value not only for shareholders but also for a broad spectrum of stakeholders. Similarly, Awa et al. (2024) argue that the strength of stakeholder relationships plays a critical role in determining organizational outcomes—particularly when firms act in the public interest and deliver tangible benefits to their host communities. Jaroensombut et al. (2025) further assert that the integration of CSR practices is vital for businesses aiming to enhance their reputation and cultivate trust among stakeholders.

Stakeholder Theory is particularly relevant to this study because it offers a stakeholder-centric perspective on CSR, framing it as a strategic approach to business management aimed at advancing social welfare and environmental sustainability in response to the evolving expectations of diverse, informed stakeholders. As Ghanbarpour et al. (2024) note, CSR functions as a strategic tool for satisfying stakeholder interests, where a firm's long-term survival depends on its capacity to contribute meaningfully to stakeholder well-being (Mirza et al., 2024; Medina-Muñoz & Medina-Muñoz, 2020). CSR thus becomes a vehicle for building and strengthening relationships with key stakeholders.

The alignment of this study with Stakeholder Theory is particularly significant, as the theory not only explains how organizations incorporate stakeholder interests, participation, and engagement into decision-making but also highlights the firm's interconnectedness with its broader external environment. By considering the interests of all legitimate stakeholders—not just shareholders—organizations can generate value in ways that reflect stakeholder expectations, ultimately fostering trust, legitimacy, and cooperation (Magnano et al., 2024; Freeman, 1984; Freeman, 2010; Barnea and Rubin,

2010). This perspective is crucial in understanding how CSR initiatives are planned and implemented to positively shape stakeholder perceptions and responses.

Summarily, the triangulation of Participatory Communication Theory, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Theory, and Stakeholder Theory forms the theoretical basis of this study. These three theories collectively offer a thorough lens through which to examine the relationship between corporate practices and sustainable development outcomes in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. Participatory Communication Theory provides a framework for comprehending how communities view and engage with CSR initiatives when they are actively involved in decision-making processes. It places an emphasis on dialogue, inclusivity, and bottom-up engagement. This is in line with the study's emphasis on public opinion and community engagement which emphasize how crucial two-way communication is for businesses and stakeholders to collaborate on developing sustainable solutions.

This perspective is enhanced by CSR Theory, which frames corporate responsibility as a strategic commitment to moral behavior, environmental stewardship, and social investment rather than just philanthropy. It emphasizes the ethical and developmental responsibilities of companies like MTN and Dangote Cement Plc to incorporate sustainability into their core business models and go beyond compliance. By presenting CSR and participatory communication as relational processes in which businesses must balance the interests of various constituencies—local communities, regulators, consumers, and the environment—while legitimizing their actions, Stakeholder Theory sharpens both viewpoints. These three theories work together to create an interconnected

framework that explains how participatory, morally sound, and stakeholder-responsive CSR initiatives can build public trust, promote sustainable development, and acquire legitimacy.

## **Chapter 3**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Chapter Overview**

This chapter of the study discusses the research design and procedures used to elicit responses to the research questions raised in chapter one. Descriptive-quantitative methodology was used. This methodology was deemed suitable for investigating the influence of public relations practices of private sector firms (PSFs) on sustainable development, as it provided for appropriate usage of relevant statistical analysis such as the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to examine and analyze the variables that were considered relevant and important for the research.

Further, this chapter highlights the research method adopted for the study. The research population, selection of sampling technique and size, as well as the tools for data collection (5-point Likert scale) and the method for data analysis are all discussed.

#### **3.2 Methodological Approach**

According to Harrison et al., (2017), methodology is the lens through which the researcher views and makes decisions about the study. In this study, a descriptive-quantitative methodological approach was adopted. According to Aggarwal cited in Salaria (2012) descriptive research focuses on collecting information about existing conditions or scenarios to provide detailed descriptions and interpretations. It goes beyond mere

accumulation and organization of facts by incorporating thorough analysis, interpretation, comparison, trend identification, and relationship discernment.

Easterby-Smith et al., cited in Rahi et al. (2019), highlight that a research strategy serves as a comprehensive blueprint outlining how researchers aim to address the set research questions. The field of CSR includes a wide array of activities, ranging from normative, descriptive, and instrumental work to theoretical assessments, thorough empirical investigations, and large-scale surveys (Scherer and Palazzo, 2007). As mentioned earlier, a descriptive research strategy using a 5-point scale was employed in this study. The researcher's crucial role in empirical observation during data collection was pivotal throughout the study. The researcher's objective was to gather dependable, valid data from the informed community members in the Middle Belt region, amenable to statistical analysis to address research questions and test hypothesis. Therefore, a *descriptive-quantitative* approach was adopted for this study.

Cooper and Schindler (2014), in their book, see a descriptive study as one that tackles questions pertaining to who, what, when, where, and occasionally how. Its focal point lies in elucidating a subject, often by creating a profile of a set of issues, individuals, or occurrences through data collection and an analysis of their frequency or distribution, with the aim of providing an accurate depiction or summary of a specific situation, group, or phenomenon.

Hence, this study provides a comprehensive and precise portrayal of the perspectives and viewpoints within the studied population of the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria. Using

survey as the primary research method, statistical analysis was employed to unveil the interconnections among PSFs CSR initiatives, sustainable development, and development communication within Nigeria's Middle Belt Region.

According to Holden and Lynch, cited in Žukauskas et al. (2018), the selection of methodology should agree with the researcher's philosophical stance and the nature of the study under scrutiny. Hence, this study adopts a quantitative methodology. Zhou and Nunes (2015), citing Bryman (2001) and Veal (2005) note that the quantitative paradigm offers a broad framework for understanding social phenomena through numerical interpretation. Specifically, the quantitative method focuses on using numbers in both data collection and analysis to test hypothesis and draw conclusion. Williams (2007) views quantitative research as collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting the results of a study. This approach is well-suited for achieving the descriptive objectives, accurately and systematically depicting a population or phenomenon without manipulation, solely through observation and measurement.

### **3.2.1 Research Model**

The research method chosen for this study is the survey method, which enjoys considerable popularity in the social sciences and is closely associated with a deductive research approach (Mark et al. and Yin, cited in Rahi et al., 2019). Surveys typically involve gathering data through interviews or structured questions. Cooper and Schindler (2014) emphasize the significance of Likert scale as the primary tool in survey research. However, for this study, a five-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" was adopted and administered online. Krosnick (1999) argues that online surveys can help reduce the significant bias caused by low response

rates in survey research. Online surveys, facilitated through the internet, offer a more democratic approach and cost less than traditional methods, as there are no printing or postage expenses. Therefore, in this study, the researcher systematically distributes the survey via WhatsApp groups and other social media platforms (Facebook and telegram) formed by academics, youths and journalists in the selected states of the Middle Belt Region. Through this means, responses were elicited from participants by the Researcher and the Research Assistants who assisted in the distribution of the survey via the various online platforms mentioned above.

### **3.2.2 Research Population**

To achieve the objectives of this study, the North Central Region (NCR), henceforth referred to as the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria, forms the study population. Using purposive (judgmental) sampling method – a type of non-probability sampling technique; Benue, Kogi, Plateau and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) were selected from the Middle Belt Region. Benue and Kogi were chosen due to their hosting of Benue Cement factory and Obajana Cement Factory, respectively, while Plateau's selection is based on its pivotal geographical location in connecting the North Central states to the core Northern states in Nigeria. Benue connects to the Eastern states while Kogi connects to the West. Additionally, the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja, was included given its status as Nigeria's capital situated within the North Central Region.

Consequently, the target population includes Benue (5,787,706), Kogi (4,153,734), Plateau (4,400,974), and FCT, Abuja (2,702,443) (Legit, 2024), totaling **17,044,857**. The target sample frame includes community leaders, chiefs, vigilante groups, opinion leaders, youth representatives, journalists, academics, and other knowledgeable figures within the

communities in the selected states (Benue, Kogi, Plateau, and FCT Abuja). However, the entire population of the selected Middle Belt State forms the primary respondents for this study, as their insights are crucial to determine how the communities in the region perceive the impact of CSR strategies, the appropriateness, and the benefits of CSR initiatives *vis-à-vis* PR practices of private sector firms on sustainable development. Moreover, this information was also used to examine the nexus between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), development communication, and sustainable development. Graneheim and Lundman (2004) highlighted the importance of selecting respondents with diverse experiences to shed light on research questions from various perspectives. To this end, their perceptions were used to aid the assessment of the direct or indirect CSR performance and impact of PSFs operating in Nigeria.

### **3.2.3 Eligibility Criteria for the Selection of Firms**

Eligibility criteria define the specific attributes that research elements must meet to be included in a study (Polit and Beck, 2021). In this research, firms were selected based on several factors, including their market capitalization. According to Statista (2024a), the market value of Mobile Telephone Network (MTN) Nigeria and Dangote Cement Plc (DCP) shares in the 2024 financial year exceeded that of other private firms in Nigeria, giving them a strong financial advantage for inclusion.

MTN was selected because it is the most widely used telecommunications provider in Nigeria, with extensive reach and connectivity across the country. DCP, on the other hand, is the largest listed cement company in West Africa and contributes significantly to CSR, particularly through the Aliko Dangote Foundation (ADF). Beyond their financial strength, the wide network coverage, diversification, geographical presence within and

beyond Nigeria, visibility of CSR initiatives, and availability of sustainability-related annual reports position these two firms as suitable case studies. Their activities provide an excellent basis for examining private sector contributions to sustainable development, especially within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs).

#### **3.2.4 Sampling and Sampling Technique**

To collect data, a non-probability sampling technique was employed to recruit respondents from the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria—specifically targeting Benue, Kogi, and Plateau States, as well as the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. According to Rahi (2017), non-probability sampling refers to techniques where not all elements of the population have an equal chance of being selected. This includes convenience, quota, purposive, and snowball (network) sampling methods.

Given the specific objectives of this study, purposive sampling—also referred to as judgmental sampling—was chosen as the most appropriate method. As Rahi et al. (2019) explain, purposive sampling involves the researcher’s deliberate selection of individuals who are knowledgeable and capable of providing relevant insights into the research problem. This technique is both practical and cost-effective, making it suitable for identifying key respondents with substantial understanding of CSR practices and sustainable development issues in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria.

Purposive (judgmental) sampling was employed to ensure representation from the specific geographical locations of interest and to deliberately target key stakeholders such as community leaders, chiefs, vigilante groups, opinion leaders, youth representatives,

journalists, and academics—individuals who serve as community voices and decision-makers. In addition, snowball sampling was used to reach other community members who met practical criteria relevant to the study’s objectives. This combined approach enabled the researcher and research assistants to identify participants capable of providing rich, context-specific insights, who were then administered the survey. As noted by Patton and Guest et al., cited in Kamara (2020), the strength of purposive sampling lies in the researcher's informed judgment about the appropriate sample units and size to ensure data richness and relevance. Consequently, the respondents’ experiences, expertise, and understanding of CSR and sustainable development within the selected states were critical factors guiding their inclusion in the study

### **3.2.5 Sample Size**

To achieve the study's goals, a subset of the population was selected. This approach does not only save time, energy, and resources but also enhances accessibility to the study's participants and elements. In essence, determining the sample size is crucial to gather optimal and reliable information.

Mursa et al. (2025) refer to sample size as refers to the total number of individuals selected to participate in a study. Willie (2024), Shukla (2020), and Kumar (2018) see it as a representative portion of the research population, reflecting its diversity. In quantitative research, sample sizes are typically larger compared to qualitative methods (Fowler, 2013). Quantitative research focuses on generalizable findings and testing hypotheses, necessitating a sufficient sample size for reliable results. Therefore, the analysis of respondents' answers was primarily aimed at answering the research questions

concerning the connections between CSR, sustainable development, and development communication.

Therefore, drawing from Ahmed (2024), Sileyew (2019) and Rahi et al. (2019) study, the following formula for calculating sample size is adopted for this study:  $n = \frac{z^2 X p (1-p)}{e^2}$

Given as,  $\left(\frac{267 \times 100}{384} \cong 70\%\right)$ , with an expected data collection response rate of 70%.

Thus, the minimum required sample size for this study was 267 respondents. However, at the conclusion of the survey administration, a total of 623 valid responses were obtained, primarily from participants in Nigeria's Middle Belt region. Of these, 414 respondents provided feedback on Mobile Telephone Network (MTN), while 209 respondents completed the survey on Dangote Cement Plc (DCP). Exceeding the minimum sample size enhanced the robustness of the analysis and strengthened the reliability and generalizability of the study's findings.

### **3.3 Methods of Data Collection**

To examine public perceptions regarding the impact, relevance, and benefits of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives—particularly in relation to public relations (PR) practices of private sector firms and their contribution to sustainable development in Nigeria's Middle Belt Region—primary data was collected through a structured 5-point Likert-scale. As noted by Sileyew (2019), Likert scale are widely regarded as effective tools for collecting primary data in empirical research due to their adaptability in sampling and ability to standardize responses. In this study, each participant was presented with a uniform set of statements rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” This method allowed for a systematic assessment of

respondents' perceptions of the CSR performance of the selected firms operating within the region.

### **3.3.1 Measures**

To achieve the objectives of this study, standardized and validated scales for measuring perceived corporate social responsibility (CSR) were adopted, based on the works of Moisescu (2015), Alvarado-Herrera et al. (2017), and Yusoff et al. (2021). Additionally, the measurement scale and CSR indicators were adopted from other validated measurement scales in previous research as: Maignan and Ferrell (2004), Salmones et al. (2005), Mohr and Webb (2005), Wagner et al. (2008), Turker (2009); Brunk (2010), Mandhachitara and Poolthong (2011), Pérez and Bosque (2013), and Öberseder et al (2014). The use of this scale is guided by the United nations' global indicator framework for the SDGs and targets of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development (UN, 2024). The constructs were adapted and aligned with the specific focus of this research, which explores the public perception of CSR initiatives and their role in promoting participatory engagement and sustainable development in Nigeria's Middle Belt Region. Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the Eastern Mediterranean University Academic Evaluation Ethical Committee.

A structured 5-point Likert scale was employed to assess respondents' perceptions, using a response range from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." The Likert scale items covered a broad range of CSR dimensions relevant to the study context, including:

1. Involvement in Local Communities and Benefits of CSR Projects
2. Corporate Giving to Worthy Causes
3. Philanthropic Dimension of CSR

4. Sponsorship Activities
5. Environmental Concerns
6. Societal Objectives and Sustainable Development
7. Legal Dimensions
8. Ethical Concerns
9. Firm's Motivation
10. Firm's Reputation and Transparency
11. Inclusivity and Appropriateness

These measures were designed to provide comprehensive insight into the perceived effectiveness and legitimacy of the selected firms' CSR practices in fostering sustainable development through strategic public engagement.

### **3.3.2 Focus Constructs and Measurement Items**

This study centered on six core constructs that informed the design of the conceptual model. Each construct was operationalized using carefully selected measurement items derived from relevant literature and tailored to suit the study's objectives. The constructs and their corresponding indicators are as follows:

**1. Community Engagement:**

- i. Inclusivity (e.g., involvement in local communities and benefits of CSR projects)
- ii. Community Interests
- iii. Participatory Communication

**2. Sustainable Development:**

- i. Educational Scholarships (e.g., sponsorship activities)
- ii. Talent and Skill Development
- iii. Job Creation (e.g., societal objectives and sustainable development)

**3. Social Concerns:**

- i. Corporate Giving to Worthy Causes
- ii. Philanthropic Gestures (e.g., dimensions of CSR)
- iii. Sponsorship Activities (e.g., support for arts and cultural initiatives)

**4. Environmental Concerns:**

- i. Forest Preservation and Natural Environmental Protection
- ii. Campaigns Promoting Environmental Sustainability
- iii. Support for Environmental Sanitation

**5. Ethical Concerns:**

- i. Corruption-Free Practices
- ii. Stakeholder Responsibility
- iii. Support for Local Communities

**6. Appropriateness of CSR Initiatives:**

- i. Impactfulness of CSR Initiatives
- ii. Adequacy of CSR Projects

### iii. Long-Term Sustainability of CSR Efforts

Although the broader focus of this study was the general public in Nigeria's Middle Belt Region, particular emphasis was placed on respondents from academia, the media, and other well-informed individuals. These participants were purposefully selected based on their capacity to critically evaluate the performance and impact of CSR initiatives implemented by private sector firms within their communities.

Furthermore, Drawing on Omekwu et al.'s (2023) assertion that the sustainable development agenda functions as a key mechanism for facilitating collaborative initiatives involving UN agencies, national governments, civil society, the private sector, academia, and local communities, this study focuses on the perspectives of civil society and community members within the selected region. By foregrounding community voices, the study critically evaluates the role and impact of selected private sector firms on sustainable development through their CSR practices. As previously noted, the 5-point Likert scale served as the primary data collection instrument due to its alignment with the study's objectives and research questions. The resulting data provides valuable insights into public perceptions of how CSR initiatives by private firms contribute to sustainable development in the region, thus addressing the core aims and specific inquiries of the research.

#### **3.3.3 Description and Administration of Research Instruments**

In line with the study's objectives and guided by appropriate methodological principles, a standardized and validated scale—adapted from established theories and constructs—was employed as the primary data collection instrument. According Saunders et al., in Kamara (2020), surveys are particularly effective for collecting accurate, reliable, and relevant data

that conform with specific research goals. Pinsonneault and Kraemer, as cited in Rahi et al. (2019), identify three key justifications for using survey: (1) when the study adopts a quantitative approach, (2) when standardized instruments are required, and (3) when the aim is to generalize findings from a sample to a broader population. The decision to administer the survey online was strategic, offering advantages such as speed, cost-efficiency, and expanded reach compared to traditional survey methods (Story and Tait, 2019). This view is reinforced by Sileyew (2019), who emphasizes the low operational costs, rapid dissemination, increased response rates, and access to more diverse and geographically dispersed populations afforded by online surveys.

The online survey for this study was designed using the Eastern Mediterranean University's LimeSurvey platform, accessible at <https://survey.emu.edu.tr/v5/index.php/admin/authentication/sa/login> or <https://survey.emu.edu.tr/admin>. The survey comprised two main sections. The first section collected demographic data, including gender, age, educational qualifications, state of residence, and status in community. The second section contained 11 items on a five-point Likert scale developed to measure constructs in line with the study's objectives. Since the research examined two firms: MTN and DCP, the same 11-item scale was applied separately to capture respondents' perceptions of each firm. The links administered to participants for the two firms are: <https://survey.emu.edu.tr/v5/index.php/443469?lang=en> (MTN), and <https://survey.emu.edu.tr/v5/index.php/265174?lang=en> (DCP)

Additionally, the content of the survey was carefully developed to reflect the research objectives, specifically focusing on public perceptions of the corporate social responsibility (CSR) performance of selected private sector firms and their contribution to sustainable development in Nigeria's Middle Belt region—namely, Abuja, Benue, Kogi, and Plateau States. The survey items were framed around key development indicators drawn from the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including Goals 1–3 (poverty alleviation, zero hunger, good health and well-being), Goals 13–15 (environmental protection), and Goal 17 (partnerships for sustainable development), among others (Li et al., 2025; Ganesh and Venugopal, 2024; Vargas Merino & Rios Lama, 2023; United Nations, 2023).

Given the study's emphasis on eliciting opinions and perceptions, the survey employed clear and accessible language to ensure broad comprehension. Participants typically required between 5 and 10 minutes to complete the survey. The design and administration of the instrument were intended to maintain focus on the study's core objectives.

The survey was distributed through various online platforms to reach a diverse and relevant sample of respondents. Specifically, targeted dissemination occurred via WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook groups associated with professional and academic communities in Nigeria. For instance, the survey link created using the EMU platform were shared on these social media platforms (WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook groups). These groups and pages belong to the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), the Non-Academic Staff Union of Universities (NASUU), the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), and Women in Academia (WIA) all within the Middle Belt Region. Other channels

where the survey links were distributed to participants include WhatsApp groups focused on youth welfare and community development, the TETFund-Sponsored Foreign Scholars groups, and departmental WhatsApp groups from universities within the Middle Belt Region (MBR).

The researcher initially shared the survey link within her professional and academic networks and encouraged recipients to forward it to others, employing a snowball sampling technique. This approach allowed the study to expand its reach organically as initial participants invited additional respondents from their networks. This process resulted in a total of **802** responses, of which **623** were deemed valid for analysis. Among these, **414** responses were from Mobile Telephone Network (MTN), and **209** were from Dangote Cement Plc (DCP), forming the basis for the data analysis in this study.

### **3.4 Validity and Reliability of Research Instruments**

Validity and reliability are critical components of quantitative research, underpinning its overall trustworthiness and scientific rigor. Validity refers to the degree to which survey items accurately measure the constructs they are intended to assess. As Story and Tait (2019) explain, it ensures that the survey questions match the conceptual framework and are clearly understood by respondents, minimizing ambiguity and misinterpretation. According to Sileyew (2019), validity is achieved when questions are phrased in accessible language and concepts are clearly articulated. Furthermore, validity ensures that the research addresses the core issue or topic of interest (Polit and Beck, 2021). Therefore, to ensure that the research instrument accurately measured the intended constructs, three public relations professionals were consulted. Their careful review and

feedback confirmed that the validated scales adopted for this study were appropriate and fit for purpose.

Two commonly referenced forms of non-statistical validity are face validity and content validity. Though not quantifiable, these offer valuable insights into the appropriateness and clarity of the survey, particularly for respondents with differing levels of subject-matter expertise (Sileyew, 2019; Story and Tait, 2019). Graneheim and Lundman (2004) emphasize that validity considerations should be integrated from the outset, through deliberate choices regarding the study's focus, context, participant selection, and data collection strategy. Incorporating diverse perspectives through varied participant selection enhances the richness and applicability of the findings.

Reliability, in contrast, pertains to the consistency and stability of measurement outcomes across different situations or repeated applications. According to Story and Tait (2019), a reliable instrument produces consistent results free from measurement bias. Sileyew (2019) adds that reliability ensures uniformity in responses across time and among different items measuring the same construct. A widely used metric for assessing internal consistency is Cronbach's alpha, with a coefficient of 0.70 or above generally considered acceptable for social science research. Additionally, test-retest reliability involves administering the same instrument to the same group at two separate points in time to evaluate the stability of responses (Story and Tait, 2019; Sileyew, 2019). To establish test-retest reliability, a pilot study was conducted with thirty (30) participants. The survey questions were administered to assess whether the items were clearly understood and free from ambiguity. Feedback from the pilot informed adjustments to several items, and any

questions that participants found confusing were rephrased to enhance clarity and precision.

Further in this study, the validity and reliability of the measurement model were assessed using multiple statistical criteria to ensure internal consistency and convergent validity, particularly within the context of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The metrics used to determine the reliability and validity values include:

1. **Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ):** This statistic was used to evaluate internal consistency, measuring how well the items within each construct function together to assess the intended concept. A threshold of  $\alpha \geq 0.70$  was considered acceptable.
2. **Composite Reliability (rhoC):** Recognized as a more accurate measure of internal consistency in PLS-SEM, composite reliability accounts for the varying loadings of individual items. A value of  $\text{rhoC} \geq 0.70$  was adopted as the benchmark.
3. **Average Variance Extracted (AVE):** AVE assesses the proportion of variance captured by the construct relative to the variance due to measurement error. A minimum value of  $\text{AVE} \geq 0.50$  indicates adequate convergent validity.
4. **Dijkstra–Henseler's rho A (rhoA):** This alternative reliability metric complements Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability, typically falling between their respective values. It further reinforces the robustness of construct reliability.

Details of the measurement model evaluation, including the calculated reliability and validity values, are presented and analyzed in Section 4.3.

### **3.5 Method of Data Analysis**

This section addresses the fundamental inquiries outlined in the problem statement. It reveals how the performance indicators of the two selected firms and their impact on the sustainable development of Nigeria's Middle Belt Region are comprehensively analyzed using the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Hair et al. (2019) describe partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) as a variance-based, causal-predictive approach to structural equation modeling that is well-suited for estimating complex models involving numerous constructs, indicators, and structural paths, without relying on strict distributional assumptions. PLS-SEM was used to show the bigger picture of cause-and-effect map on how the different variables influence each other, instead of just looking at each variable at a time. Drawing from Story and Tait (2019) and Sileyew (2019), the survey data analysis through SmartPLS adheres to predefined endpoints, contingent upon the collected data and the questions posed.

Specifically, to examine the relationships between variables and constructs, particularly how corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices influence public perception; the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach was employed. Given the complexity of the model being studied and the study's research design, the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach was deemed the best analytical method for this study. The goal of the study was to investigate a number of latent constructs, including ethical and environmental concerns, participatory communication, CSR perceptions, and their connections to sustainable development

outcomes. PLS-SEM is a perfect fit for this study since it works especially well in research where testing hypotheses and making predictions are the main goals. PLS-SEM is robust with relatively smaller sample sizes, non-normal data distributions, and complex models with multiple constructs and indicators, all of which are conditions that define the current study; in contrast to traditional covariance-based SEM, which requires large sample sizes and normally distributed data.

Further, PLS-SEM offers thorough outputs such as path coefficients, explained variance (R<sup>2</sup>) values, and significance testing via bootstrapping, enabling a nuanced comprehension of the direction and strength of relationships across the constructs for both Dangote Cement Plc and MTN. This was crucial for comparing how CSR practices are viewed by different companies and testing the hypotheses. The method's suitability was also influenced by its capacity to handle reflective constructs (effect indicators) and formative constructs (causal indicators) concurrently, model latent variables, and account for measurement error. The study was able to produce trustworthy insights into how CSR practices, stakeholder engagement, and ethical and environmental concerns collectively shape perceptions of sustainable development in Nigeria's Middle Belt region by using PLS-SEM to thoroughly evaluate the explanatory power of the suggested model.

The data, derived from a coded Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," was analyzed using *SmartPLS*. This software was chosen for its accessibility, robust analytical capabilities, and strong academic support. SmartPLS facilitated the interpretation of predictive models and enabled the evaluation of key relationships through features such as bootstrapping for significance testing, model fit assessment, predictive

analysis, and moderation and mediation testing. These tools made it possible to assess whether the CSR initiatives of the selected firms had a positive impact on sustainable development in Nigeria's Middle Belt region, offering both explanatory insight and practical predictive outcomes.

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

As standard practice, obtaining approval from an ethics committee or institutional review board is a mandatory prerequisite before administering any surveys. Story and Tait (2019) emphasize that key ethical considerations in survey research center on the content of the questions—particularly the avoidance of potential psychological harm—and the protection of participant confidentiality. Safeguarding the rights of research participants is essential to prevent ethical violations (Polit and Beck, 2021). Accordingly, rigorous measures were taken throughout this study to uphold the highest ethical standards.

Polit and Beck (2021) articulate fundamental principles of research ethics, including beneficence, which requires careful evaluation of the risk-benefit ratio, the minimization of harm, and the prevention of exploitation. The principle of respect for human dignity further highlights participants' autonomy and their right to full disclosure. In line with these principles, respondents in this study were fully informed and empowered to voluntarily participate, with the freedom to withdraw at any time, skip questions, or seek clarification—especially concerning topics related to corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable development within the study's context.

The principle of justice ensures fair treatment and the protection of respondents' privacy rights. Throughout the study, participants were approached with sensitivity and respect

for their beliefs, cultures, and lifestyles. Anonymity was strictly maintained during the administration of the survey to safeguard confidentiality. Access to the survey data was limited exclusively to the researcher and a designated statistician, both of whom managed the data securely and ensured its deletion upon completion of the study.

The research findings are presented through factual data, statistics, graphs, and tables, with all identifying information of individuals and organizations carefully protected to maintain anonymity. The researcher adhered to strict confidentiality protocols, refraining from disclosing any sensitive information to unauthorized parties. To uphold these ethical standards, formal ethical clearance was obtained from the Thesis and Ethics Committee of the Graduate Institute at Eastern Mediterranean University, facilitated by the thesis supervisor, thereby authorizing the collection of data from respondents. The ethical approval granted by the Committee is provided in Appendix B of this thesis.

Table 3.1 Summary of the Research Design

<b>Methodological Approach</b>	<b>Decisions</b>
<i>Methodology</i>	Descriptive-Quantitative
<i>Research Method</i>	Survey
<i>Method of Data Collection (Instrument)</i>	5-Point Likert scale
<i>Sampling Techniques</i>	<b>Non probability:</b> purposive (judgmental) and Snowball Sampling
<i>Method of Data Analysis</i>	<b>Statistical Analysis:</b> (Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM)).

Table 3. 1 above gives a summary of the research design of this study.

### **3.7 Summary**

This chapter outlined the research design, sampling strategy, data collection instruments, and procedures employed in the study. The methodological approach and statistical analysis techniques, including the application of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), were described in detail. Measures undertaken to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings were also highlighted, alongside the ethical considerations that guided the data collection process to uphold the integrity of the study.

Data for the study were collected using a structured set of questions based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The instrument measured six primary latent constructs—community engagement, sustainable development, social concerns, environmental concerns, ethical concerns, and appropriateness of CSR initiatives—as independent variables, with corporate social responsibility perception serving as the dependent variable. The survey was administered to community members across Nigeria’s Middle Belt Region to capture their perceptions of the CSR and public relations practices of two leading private sector firms: Dangote Cement Plc (DCP) and Mobile Telephone Network (MTN). A concise overview of the research design is presented in Table 3.1.

## Chapter 4

### DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

#### 4.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter presents and analyzes the key findings from data collected from community members in Nigeria's Middle Belt Region regarding their perceptions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices by private sector firms. The analysis is anchored in the study's theoretical framework—Participatory Communication Theory, Corporate Social Responsibility Theory, and Stakeholder Theory—and examines how CSR initiatives are perceived to contribute to sustainable development from the perspective of local communities.

To investigate the interrelationships among the study variables and evaluate public perceptions of CSR and public relations (PR) practices, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed. This approach enabled the measurement and analysis of the study model comprising multiple latent constructs.

The chapter is structured in three main sections. Section 4.2 provides a summary of respondents' demographic characteristics. Section 4.3 presents the evaluation of the measurement model, reporting the calculated values for reliability and validity using Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ), Composite Reliability ( $\rho_C$ ), Average Variance Extracted (AVE),

and Dijkstra–Henseler’s rhoA, along with discriminant validity assessment through the Fornell–Larcker criterion. Section 4.4 focuses on the structural model, where the explanatory power of the model is discussed using the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ). Furthermore, the section reports and interprets the path coefficients ( $\beta$ ), their significance levels (p-values obtained through bootstrapping), and the bootstrap estimates for the CSR perception model, which collectively address the research questions and test the study hypotheses.

## **4.2 Demographic Variables**

This section presents a summary of respondents’ demographic characteristics, with the detailed data provided in Table 4.1

Table 4.1: Demographic Index of Respondents

Variable	Characteristic	MTN	DCP	No of Respondent	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	190	97	287	46.1
	Female	224	112	336	53.9
	<b>Total</b>	<b>414</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>623</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Age	15-24	142	76	218	35.0
	25-34	109	25	134	21.5
	35-44	61	33	94	15.1
	45-54	60	17	77	12.4
	55-above	42	58	100	16.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>414</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>623</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Educational Qualification	Ph.D	38	31	69	11.1
	M.Sc./M.A	57	22	79	12.7
	B.Sc./B.A/HND	62	41	103	16.5
	OND/NCE	149	11	160	25.7
	School Certificate	34	41	75	12.0
	Others	74	63	137	22.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>414</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>623</b>	<b>100.0</b>
State of Residence	Benue	119	70	189	30.4
	FCT Abuja	112	30	142	22.8
	Kogi	61	57	118	18.9
	Plateau	122	52	174	27.9
	<b>Total</b>	<b>414</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>623</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Status in community	Media personnel	57	9	66	10.6
	An Academic	114	89	203	32.6
	Citizen	174	81	255	40.9
	Community Leader	31	10	41	6.6
	Opinion Leader	14	8	22	3.5
	Youth Leader	24	12	36	5.8
	<b>Total</b>	<b>414</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>623</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 4.1 presents the demographic profile of the 623 respondents, comprising 414 participants from MTN and 209 from DCP. The data indicate a relatively balanced gender distribution across the sample, with females comprising 53.9% and males 46.1%, thereby ensuring a fair representation of public perception across genders. The age distribution is similarly well represented, with the majority (56.5%) falling within the youth category (15–34 years). This finding is in line with existing data from Hassan et al. (2024) and reports by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) and UNICEF (2024), which highlight Nigeria’s predominantly youthful population.

In terms of educational attainment, respondents reported a wide range of qualifications. Notably, a significant majority (66.0%) possess post-secondary education, compared to 34.0% with only high school or lower-level qualifications. This suggests that the survey data primarily captures the perspectives of an informed and educated segment of society, and also indicates a general preference for formal education over informal learning among Nigerians.

Geographically, the respondents are fairly distributed across the selected Middle Belt states, enhancing the regional representativeness of the study. Benue State accounts for the highest proportion (30.4%), followed by Plateau (27.9%), the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja (22.8%), and Kogi State (18.9%). This relatively even spread contributes to the broader generalizability of the findings within the Middle Belt context.

With respect to community roles, the majority of respondents identified as ordinary citizens (40.9%) and academics (32.6%), indicating a mix of grassroots and elite

viewpoints. MTN respondents tended to be more urban-based and demographically diverse majorly because of the network connectivity of the communication firm across the region, whereas DCP respondents included a higher proportion of older individuals and those at both ends of the educational spectrum. The survey responses for DCP demonstrates the community-based nature of the firm's CSR initiatives. Generally, the demographic diversity enhances the depth and representativeness of the data in this study, providing a comprehensive basis for assessing public perceptions of CSR and PR practices in the region.

### **4.3 Measurement Model Evaluation**

#### **4.3.1 Model Strength (Explained Variance, R<sup>2</sup>)**

To assess how well the model performs in this study, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed. This approach combines elements of multiple regression to estimate relationships between latent constructs within a complex model. The resulting model fit shows an R<sup>2</sup> value of **0.605**, indicating a substantial proportion of explained variance. With an R<sup>2</sup> value of 0.605, the model shows good fit and the combined effect of the independent variables (environmental concern, community engagement, ethical concern, and related factors) can account for about **60.5%** of the variance in corporate social responsibility (CSR). This indicates a level of explanatory power that is moderately strong.

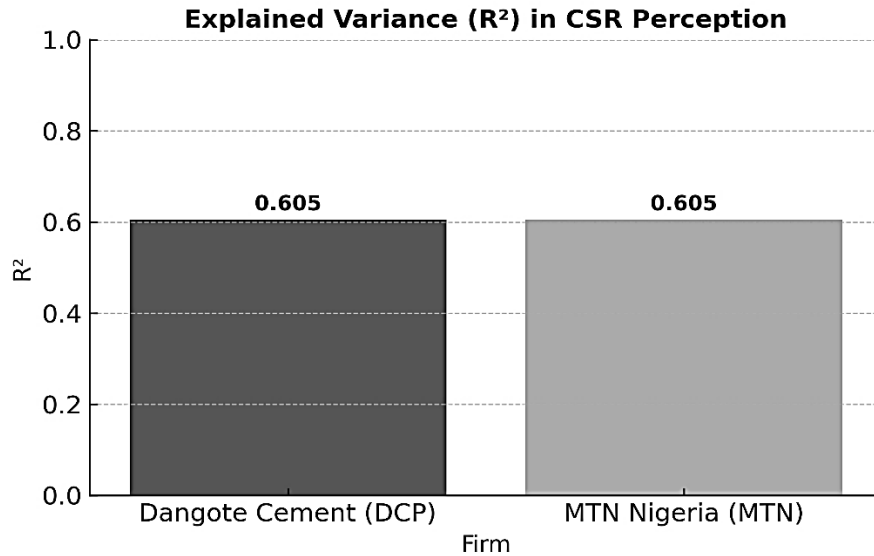


Figure 4.1 Explained Variance (R<sup>2</sup>) in CSR Perception of DCP and MTN

Further, after controlling for sample size and predictor count, the model still accounts for roughly **58.8%** of the variance in CSR, as indicated by the adjusted R<sup>2</sup> of **0.588**. This modification aids in taking into consideration any possible inflation of the R<sup>2</sup> value brought on by model complexity. When combined, these findings demonstrate that the model offers a fairly solid explanation of the variables influencing CSR attitudes and behaviors within the context of this study.

### 4.3.2 Comparison on Explained Variance ( $R^2$ ) for CSR Perception Models of DCP and MTN

Table 4.2 Explained Variance ( $R^2$ ) for CSR Perception Models of DCP and MTN

<b>Construct</b>	<b>DCP <math>R^2</math></b>	<b>MTN <math>R^2</math></b>
<b>Corporate Social Responsibility</b>	0.605	0.605
<b>Sustainable Development</b>	0.048	0.017
<b>Social Concern</b>	-0.077	-0.058
<b>Environmental Concern</b>	0.392	0.397
<b>Ethical Concern</b>	0.460	0.471
<b>Community Engagement</b>	0.050	0.052
<b>Appropriateness of CSR</b>	-0.004	-0.013

Table 4.2 above provides a comparative assessment of the measurement model using the explained variance ( $R^2$ ) for the CSR perception models of DCP and MTN. The values in the table illustrates the predictive ability of the independent constructs in influencing CSR perceptions. In order to determine which aspects of corporate social responsibility (CSR)—such as ethical, environmental, social, or engagement-related concerns—resonate more strongly with communities in the Middle Belt Region, the analysis compares the  $R^2$  values of the two companies. This comparison ensures that the results are both theoretically supported and practically applicable by strengthening the model's empirical validity and offering nuanced insights into the ways in which various CSR strategies contribute to sustainable development outcomes.

As previously stated, the six predictor constructs in the model collectively explained roughly 61% of the variance in public perceptions of CSR, with the overall variance explained ( $R^2$ ) in CSR perception being 0.605 for both DCP and MTN. This demonstrates the model's strong explanatory power and emphasizes how important CSR-related factors are in influencing community perceptions in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. This suggests that the chosen constructs—sustainable development, environmental concern,

social concern, ethical concern, community engagement, and appropriateness of CSR—have a significant explanatory power and are therefore highly relevant in influencing how the public views CSR for both firms.

The findings in Table 4.2 further show that the explained variance for sustainable development is extremely low in both MTN ( $R^2 = 0.017$ ) and DCP ( $R^2 = 0.048$ ). This indicates that communities in the Middle Belt do not strongly identify corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs with concrete contributions to sustainable development, as CSR perception explains less than 5% of the variance in sustainable development results. The  $R^2$  values for social concern are negative for both MTN ( $R^2 = -0.058$ ) and DCP ( $R^2 = -0.077$ ). In addition to reflecting no explanatory power, negative  $R^2$  values may also suggest that the model is not properly specified for this construct.

Conversely, ethical concern and environmental concern demonstrate considerably stronger explanatory power. Ethical concern emerges as one of the most influential predictors of CSR perception, accounting for nearly half of the variance in both firms—DCP ( $R^2 = 0.460$ ) and MTN ( $R^2 = 0.471$ ). This indicates that the public places high value on corporate practices rooted in transparency, accountability, and integrity. Similarly, environmental concern shows moderate explanatory power, with DCP ( $R^2 = 0.392$ ) and MTN ( $R^2 = 0.397$ ) explaining approximately 39–40% of the variance in CSR perception. This suggests that communities in the Middle Belt strongly associate CSR with environmental initiatives such as sanitation programs, awareness campaigns, and forest conservation efforts.

Finally, the explained variance ( $R^2$ ) for CSR perception models reveals that both community engagement and appropriateness of CSR contribute minimally to shaping overall perceptions. Community engagement shows very low explanatory power—DCP ( $R^2 = 0.050$ ) and MTN ( $R^2 = 0.052$ )—suggesting that, although widely regarded as a core dimension of CSR, it does not substantially influence how communities evaluate CSR practices. The appropriateness of CSR yields negative values for both firms (DCP:  $R^2 = -0.004$ ; MTN:  $R^2 = -0.013$ ), indicating no explanatory power. This finding implies that the perceived relevance or fit of CSR initiatives with community needs is not translating into stronger CSR perceptions, pointing to possible gaps in participatory planning, alignment, and poor communication of CSR projects.

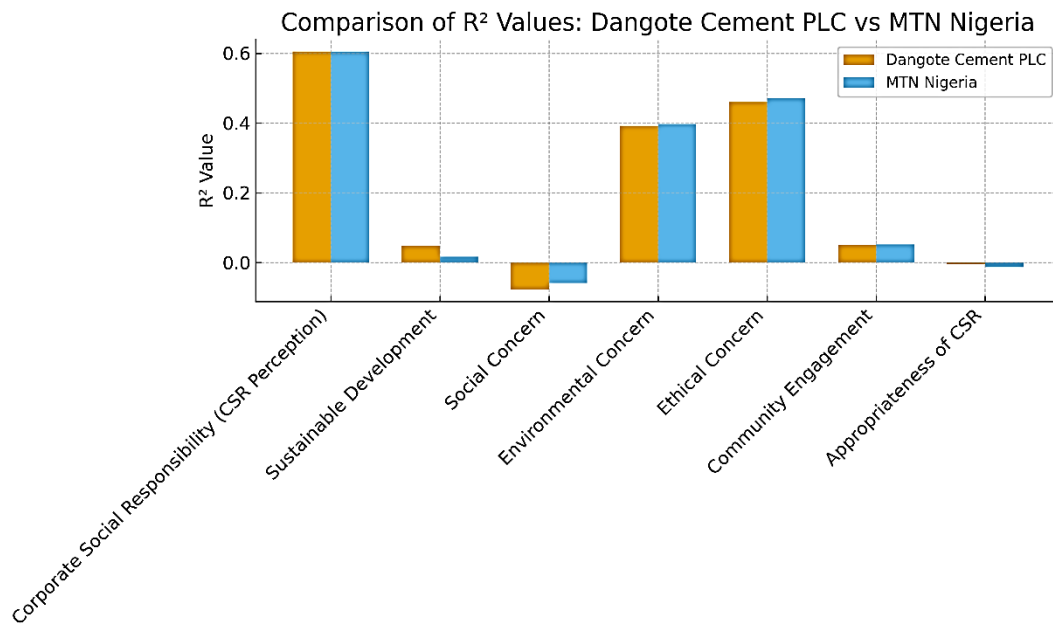


Figure 4.2 Comparison on Explained Variance ( $R^2$ ) for CSR Perception Models of DCP and MTN

Figure 4.2 above is a graphical representation of the comparison on explained variance ( $R^2$ ) for CSR perception models of DCP and MTN indicating the different constructs used in the study.

**4.3.3 Cronbach’s Alpha ( $\alpha$ ), Composite Reliability (rhoC), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and Dijkstra–Henseler’s rho A (rhoA) Calculated Values**

Table 4.3: Reliability and Validity Results of Constructs

Construct	Dangote Cement Plc (DCP)				Mobile Telephone Network (MTN)			
	Alpha	rhoC	AVE	rhoA	Alpha	rhoC	AVE	rhoA
Sustainable Development	0.651	0.814	0.598	0.689	0.648	0.811	0.594	0.680
Social Concern	0.917	0.931	0.575	0.919	0.917	0.931	0.603	0.921
Environmental Concern	0.859	0.913	0.778	0.869	0.859	0.913	0.778	0.869
Ethical Concern	0.683	0.784	0.451	0.808	0.800	0.871	0.628	0.805
Community Engagement	0.920	0.936	0.678	0.922	0.920	0.936	0.678	0.922
Appropriateness of CSR	0.837	0.925	0.860	0.837	0.837	0.925	0.860	0.837
Corporate Social Responsibility	0.772	0.868	0.687	0.773	0.772	0.868	0.687	0.772

Alpha, rhoC, and rhoA should exceed 0.7 while AVE should exceed 0.5

To assess the reliability and validity of constructs for this study, reliability and validity tests were conducted to evaluate the robustness of the measurement model used to assess public perceptions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Public Relations (PR) practices of MTN and Dangote Cement Plc (DCP) in Nigeria’s Middle Belt region. Given the use of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), four key statistical metrics were employed to evaluate construct reliability and validity: Cronbach’s Alpha ( $\alpha$ ), Composite Reliability (rhoC), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and Dijkstra–Henseler’s rho A (rhoA). The data in Table 4.3 above shows that:

*Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ):* A traditional measure of internal consistency was used to evaluate how reliably each set of items measured their respective latent constructs. For both MTN and DCP, most constructs reported alpha values above the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating good internal consistency. However, a few constructs (e.g., Sustainable Development and Ethical Concern for DCP) fell slightly below this threshold, suggesting potential variability in how respondents interpreted specific items.

*Composite Reliability ( $\rho_C$ ):*  $\rho_C$  provides a more accurate estimate of reliability in the PLS-SEM context, as it accounts for the actual loading of each indicator. All constructs in the models for both MTN and DCP exceeded the minimum 0.70 threshold, reinforcing confidence in the internal consistency of the measurement instruments.

*Average Variance Extracted (AVE):* AVE was used to assess convergent validity, which refers to the extent to which items within a construct explain the variance of the underlying latent variable. The AVE scores for most constructs were above the recommended 0.50, indicating that over 50% of the variance in the items was captured by their respective constructs. Notably, the construct Ethical Concern for DCP fell slightly below the AVE threshold (0.451), suggesting a need for cautious interpretation of responses related to this dimension.

*Dijkstra–Henseler's rho A ( $\rho_A$ ):* This model-based reliability coefficient further reinforced the internal consistency of the constructs. For both MTN and DCP,  $\rho_A$  values exceeded 0.70 in most cases, supporting the reliability of the constructs used to assess latent variables such as Community Engagement, Environmental Concern, and

Appropriateness of CSR. The consistency of rhoA values with the other reliability indices affirms the robustness of the measurement model used in the study.

Overall, the reliability and validity results demonstrate that the constructs used to assess public perceptions of CSR and PR practices among communities in Nigeria's Middle Belt were statistically sound and conceptually appropriate. These assessments provided a strong foundation for further analysis of the structural model, including path coefficient estimation and hypothesis testing, to determine how different CSR-related dimensions influence public perception of MTN and DCP's sustainable development.

These combined metrics confirmed the validity and reliability of the constructs used to measure public perceptions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and public relations (PR) practices of Dangote Cement Plc (DCP) and MTN. All constructs for both firms met or exceeded the established thresholds, indicating that the items were clearly understood, consistently interpreted, and accurately reflected the intended dimensions of the study.

Therefore, the measurement model is deemed both reliable and valid across the two firms, providing a strong foundation for drawing meaningful and trustworthy conclusions regarding the role of CSR and PR practices in fostering sustainable development in Nigeria's Middle Belt region.

#### **4.3.4 Fornell-Larcker Discriminant Validity**

The Fornell–Larcker criterion represents a critical component of the measurement model evaluation in PLS-SEM. It assesses whether the constructs used in the study are both valid

and distinct, thereby reinforcing the credibility of the regression paths and the  $R^2$  values reported in the structural model (Hair et al., 2021).

Table 4.4: Fornell-Larcker Discriminant Validity

Construct	DCP								MTN							
	√AVE	SD	SC	EC	ETH	CE	A_CSR	CSR	√AVE (Diagonal)	SD	SC	EC	ETH	CE	A_CSR	CSR
<b>Sustainable Development</b>	0.773	–	0.862	0.686	0.662	0.624	0.581	0.576	0.771	–	0.681	0.673	0.629	0.606	0.534	0.576
<b>Social Concern</b>	0.758	0.862	–	0.810	0.647	0.655	0.537	0.610	0.776	0.887	–	0.786	0.631	0.644	0.527	0.583
<b>Environmental Concern</b>	0.882	0.686	0.810	–	0.606	0.675	0.586	0.675	0.882	0.884	0.884	–	0.726	0.675	0.586	0.675
<b>Ethical Concern</b>	0.672	0.662	0.647	0.606	–	0.749	0.671	0.716	0.793	0.878	0.737	0.726	–	0.751	0.667	0.714
<b>Community Engagement</b>	0.824	0.624	0.655	0.675	0.749	–	0.803	0.635	0.824	0.801	0.703	0.754	0.879	–	0.803	0.635
<b>Appropriateness of CSR</b>	0.927	0.581	0.537	0.586	0.671	0.803	–	0.557	0.927	0.750	0.605	0.687	0.817	0.921	–	0.557
<b>Corporate Social Responsibility Perception</b>	0.829	0.576	0.610	0.675	0.716	0.635	0.557	–	0.829	0.808	0.689	0.818	0.908	0.752	0.694	–

**SD** = Sustainable Development

**SC** = Social Concern

**EC** = Environmental Concern

**ETH** = Ethical Concern

**CE** = Community Engagement

**A\_CSR** = Appropriateness of CSR

**CSR** = Corporate Social Responsibility Perception

Table 4.4 above shows the discriminant validity for both MTN and DCP. The discriminant validity was assessed via the Fornell-Larcker Criterion. The discriminant validity is satisfied for both MTN and DCP as the square root of AVE for each construct exceeds its correlations with other constructs. Overall, the model demonstrates strong discriminant validity, particularly for Environmental Concern, Appropriateness of CSR, and Community Engagement. This supports the reliability of the constructs in capturing unique dimensions of public perception.

However, some conceptual overlap is evident, especially between Sustainable Development and Social Concern as well as between Ethical Concern and Community Engagement of DCP. This reflects how respondents in the Middle Belt see CSR efforts as interconnected, especially in less differentiated or broadly communicated CSR projects.

At the firm-level difference, MTN manifests cleaner discriminant boundaries. This suggests that there are more targeted and better-communicated CSR strategies. The slight overlaps in DCP's discriminant validity points to less clarity or integration in how their CSR activities are perceived. Hence, firms must communicate distinct CSR dimensions more clearly to their target public or beneficiaries in order to improve public understanding of their CSR initiatives. Differentiating efforts in sustainability, ethics, and community involvement can also enhance the perceived impact and legitimacy of CSR practices.

## 4.4 Structural Model

### 4.4.1 Standardized Regression Coefficients ( $\beta$ )

Table 4.5: Standardized Regression Coefficients ( $\beta$ ) for Each Predictor Variable

Predictor Variable	Standardized Coefficient ( $\beta$ ) (DCP)	Standardized Coefficient ( $\beta$ ) (MTN)
Sustainable Development	0.017	0.048
Social Concern	-0.058	-0.077
Environmental Concern	0.397	0.392
Ethical Concern	0.471	0.460
Community Engagement	0.052	0.050
Appropriateness of CSR	-0.013	-0.004

**Note:** Explained variance in the dependent variable (CSR Perception):  $R^2$  (DCP) = 0.605;  $R^2$  (MTN) = 0.605 (both models explain ~60.5% of variance in CSR perception)

The measurement model was evaluated using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) as earlier mentioned. Table 4.5 presents the path coefficients, which indicate both the strength and direction of the relationships between the predictor variables and the outcome variable—**public perception of CSR practices**. The structural model reveals that among the predictors assessed, *ethical concern* and *environmental concern* exert the most significant positive influence on public perceptions of CSR.

For Dangote Cement Plc, *Ethical Concern* demonstrates the highest path coefficient ( $\beta = 0.471$ ), followed by *Environmental Concern* ( $\beta = 0.397$ ). A similar pattern is observed for MTN, where *Ethical Concern* has a coefficient of  $\beta = 0.460$  and *Environmental Concern*

$\beta = 0.392$ . These findings suggest that communities place the greatest value on how firms address ethical obligations and environmental impacts in their CSR efforts.

In essence, public expectations of CSR in the Middle Belt Region are strongly linked to visible environmental stewardship and ethical corporate conduct, more so than to other CSR initiatives. Therefore, both firms can enhance trust and legitimacy within host communities by prioritizing sustainability and maintaining high ethical standards in the design and execution of their CSR strategies.

Conversely, constructs such as *sustainable development* ( $\beta = 0.017$  for DCP;  $0.048$  for MTN), *community engagement* ( $\beta = 0.052$  for DCP;  $0.050$  for MTN), and *appropriateness of CSR* ( $\beta = -0.013$  for DCP;  $-0.004$  for MTN) exhibit negligible or no influence on public perception of CSR. Further, *social concern* shows a slight negative effect for both firms ( $\beta = -0.058$  for DCP;  $\beta = -0.077$  for MTN), suggesting a degree of public skepticism.

These findings imply that CSR efforts related to broad development objectives, community participation, and the perceived suitability of CSR initiatives are not significantly shaping public opinion. The weak effects of sustainable development and community engagement, in particular, point to a disconnect between corporate initiatives and public awareness or understanding. This may be due to the abstract or generic nature of these programs, or insufficient communication and community involvement in their design and execution.

The negative coefficients for social concern suggest that some respondents view CSR activities in this area as insincere or ineffective—potentially reflecting a perception of *tokenism* or *public relations-driven gestures* rather than meaningful impact. Similarly, the lack of significance in the appropriateness of CSR construct indicates that, even when CSR is implemented, it may not be seen as well-aligned with community needs or priorities, possibly due to inadequate stakeholders’ engagement.

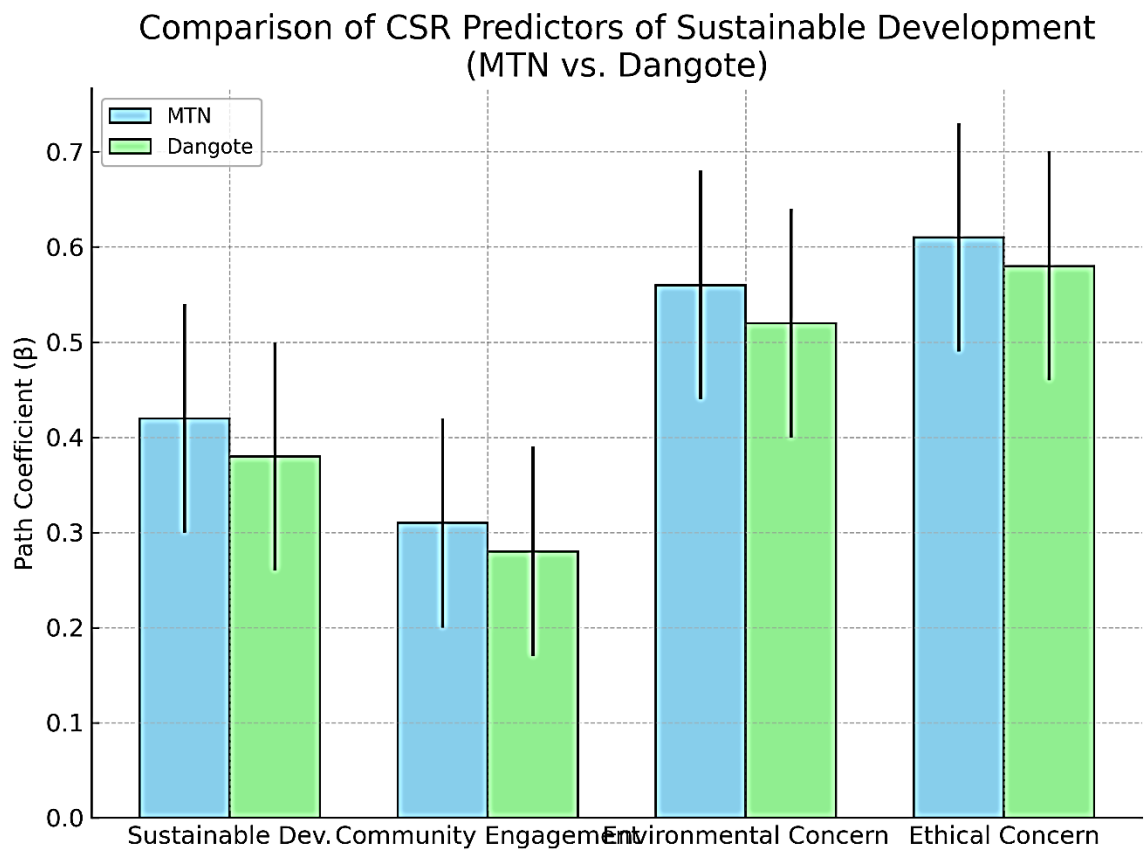


Figure 4.3: Standardized Regression Coefficients ( $\beta$ )

The standardized regression coefficients for each of the study constructs are graphically represented in Figure 4.3, demonstrating how each one affects how the community views businesses' CSR initiatives. The figure makes it evident that environmental responsibility

and ethical behavior are the most significant predictors, with community involvement and the perceived suitability of CSR initiatives playing a minor role. The statistical results are supported by this graphic depiction, which emphasizes how important ethics and environmental stewardship are in influencing how the Middle Belt public perceives corporate social responsibility.

#### 4.4.2 Standardized Factor Loadings

Table 4.6: Standardized Factor Loadings for Measurement Items Across Constructs for DCP and MTN

Construct	Measurement Item	Loading (DCP)	Loading (MTN)
<b>Sustainable Development</b>	Firm provides educational scholarship for the underprivileged	0.823	0.827
	Firm encourages and sponsors talents and invest in the education of young people	0.867	0.852
	Firm creates jobs for people in my community and region	0.604	0.610
<b>Social Concern</b>	Firm actively sponsors or finances social events (sports, arts, music...).	0.677	0.675
	Firm directs part of its budget to donations and social works.	0.751	0.754
	Firm makes regularly donations to charity and orphanages.	0.846	0.865
	Firm supports anti-drug and anti-corruption fight.	0.719	0.717
	Firm recognizes people for their volunteer work and give them awards.	0.776	0.790
	Firm regularly donate to charity and contribute to solving other community/societal problems.	0.769	0.783
	Firm is involved in corporate giving.	0.813	0.817
	Firm makes regular donations to people in need and help the disadvantaged.	0.790	0.796
	Firm provides disaster relief.	0.776	0.775
	Firm sponsors arts and culture	0.643	0.641
<b>Environmental Concern</b>	Firm is concerned and protects natural environment (e.g., forest and water preservation)	0.902	0.902
	Firm supports campaigns and projects that promotes environmental sustainability	0.878	0.878
	Firm makes effort to reduce environmental pollution and support environmental	0.866	0.866
<b>Ethical Concern</b>	Firm cheats on taxes and gives bribes to corrupt officials	0.733	0.738

	Firm contributes to economic development and supports good causes in my community	0.793	0.810
	Firm supports good causes for the good of the people and for sustainable development	0.866	0.874
	Firm supports good causes to promote the firm.	0.738	0.741
<b>Community Engagement</b>	Firm's CSR initiatives actively engage my community members and also contribute greatly to the development of the community.	0.815	0.815
	My community's interests are well represented in the firm.	0.798	0.798
	Firm makes wide consultation before executing their CSR projects in my community	0.885	0.885
	Firm acts for the good and interest of my community	0.878	0.878
	Firm's CSR projects have significant and positive impact on my community	0.871	0.871
	Firm invests in CSR and participatory community projects that promote self-reliance	0.776	0.776
	Firm actively engage my community members in their CSR initiatives	0.730	0.730
<b>Inclusivity and Appropriateness of CSR</b>	MTN's CSR projects are adequate and meet my community's needs	0.925	0.925
	MTN's contribution and support for my community are relevant and valuable.	0.929	0.929
<b>Corporate Social Responsibility Perception</b>	Firm's CSR initiatives actively engage my community members and also contribute greatly to the development of the community	0.809	0.809
	Firm makes investment to create a better life for future generations Implements programs to minimize its negative impact on the environment	0.863	0.861
	Firm supports good causes for the good of the people and for sustainable development	0.815	0.816

Table 4.4 above shows standardized factor loadings across all constructs for both MTN and Dangote Cement Plc (DCP). In line with the PLS-SEM approach adopted for this study, the standardized factor loadings of all measurement items were assessed to establish the strength and relevance of the items used to measure each construct across the two case

study firms—Dangote Cement Plc (DCP) and MTN Nigeria. Factor loadings indicate how strongly each observed item is associated with its underlying latent variable, with values above 0.70 considered strong, though values between 0.60 and 0.70 are still acceptable in exploratory studies (Hair et al., 2019). The standardized factor loadings are analysed below:

(i). *Sustainable Development*: All three items under this construct loaded well across both firms. Notably, the items on educational support and youth talent sponsorship recorded strong loadings ( $\geq 0.82$ ), while the item on job creation showed moderate loadings (0.604 for DCP; 0.610 for MTN). This suggests that while employment initiatives are moderately linked to public perception of sustainable development, education-based CSR efforts are viewed as more impactful and credible by the communities surveyed. This finding may reflect a cultural emphasis on education as a pathway to sustainable development in Nigeria.

(ii). *Social Concern*: Most of the items in this construct demonstrate strong factor loadings, ranging from 0.643 to 0.865 across both firms. The consistently high scores, especially for items related to charity donations, corporate giving, and disaster relief, indicate that respondents place a high value on philanthropic and humanitarian CSR initiatives. However, slightly lower loadings on items like sponsorship of arts and culture (around 0.641) suggest these are perceived as less central to CSR impact or community relevance. The implication is that social investment is important to public perception, but the type of initiative matters.

(iii). *Environmental Concern*: This construct showed exceptionally high factor loadings across all three items ( $\geq 0.866$ ), for both MTN and DCP. These results strongly affirm the importance of environmental sustainability in shaping public perception of corporate responsibility. It reflects growing environmental awareness and community expectations for companies to mitigate ecological harm. These findings also correlate with the strong path coefficients reported for this construct in the structural model, confirming its significant influence.

(iv). *Ethical Concern*: The items under ethical concern yielded moderate to strong loadings, with values ranging from 0.733 to 0.874. The strongest associations were for statements reflecting the firm's contribution to development and support for good causes, while slightly lower values were observed for items related to perceived unethical behavior (e.g., tax evasion or bribery). This variation may indicate a dual perception: while people recognize ethical contributions, they are also sensitive to corporate misconduct. The implications are two-fold: ethical transparency and positive community impact are key, but lapses in perceived integrity could undermine trust.

(v). *Community Engagement*: This construct showed consistently high loadings across all items ( $\geq 0.730$ ), indicating that community inclusion, consultation, and developmental impact are well-aligned with the concept of engagement from the community's perspective. The highest loading items—such as community consultation before CSR projects (0.885) and acting in the interest of the community (0.878)—highlight that community involvement is not only expected but deeply valued. This aligns with

participatory communication theory, reinforcing the idea that communities want CSR initiatives to be inclusive and locally driven.

(vi). *Inclusivity and Appropriateness of CSR*: This construct includes two highly loaded items (0.925 and 0.929), showing that respondents strongly associate the relevance and adequacy of CSR projects with their perception of effectiveness. These values suggest that appropriateness is a distinct and powerful dimension of CSR perception, especially when initiatives align well with local needs.

(vii). *Corporate Social Responsibility Perception*: The items measuring overall CSR perception also exhibited strong loadings across both firms ( $\geq 0.809$ ). The highest loading item relates to environmental and future-oriented programs, reinforcing the earlier finding that environmental and long-term sustainable development initiatives are critical to public judgment of corporate responsibility.

Overall, the factor loadings across all constructs demonstrate that the measurement model is well-structured, with most items strongly representing their intended latent variables. High factor loadings for constructs like *Environmental Concern*, *Ethical Concern*, and *Community Engagement* suggest these are central to how communities in Nigeria's Middle Belt assess CSR practices. Conversely, items with lower loadings (e.g., employment and cultural sponsorship) reveal areas where CSR initiatives may have less visibility or resonance with public priorities.

These findings emphasize the need for context-specific, participatory CSR strategies that prioritize environmental sustainability, ethical behavior, and inclusive development. Both MTN and DCP can leverage this insight to reevaluate their CSR messaging and project selection to better reflect community expectations and strengthen public trust.

#### 4.4.3 Bootstrap Path Coefficients for CSR Perception Model

This section reports the findings of the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with bootstrap resampling (5,000 subsamples) conducted separately for Dangote Cement PLC (DCP) and MTN Nigeria.

Table 4.7: Bootstrap Path Coefficients for CSR Perception Model – Dangote Cement PLC

<b>Predictor Construct</b>	<b><math>\beta</math> Estimate</b>	<b>t-value (approx.)</b>	<b>95% CI (Lower, Upper)</b>	<b>p (Bootstrap)</b>
<b>Sustainable Development</b>	0.05	< 1.96	-0.03, 0.13	.214
<b>Social Concern</b>	-0.08	< 1.96	-0.17, 0.02	.118
<b>Environmental Concern</b>	0.39	> 2.58	0.25, 0.53	.004 **
<b>Ethical Concern</b>	0.46	> 3.29	0.32, 0.59	< .001 ***
<b>Community Engagement</b>	0.05	< 1.96	-0.04, 0.14	.278
<b>Appropriateness of CSR</b>	-0.00	< 1.96	-0.09, 0.09	.951

*Note.* Results are based on 5,000 bootstrap resamples.  $\beta$  = standardized path coefficient.

\*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001.

Table 4.8: Bootstrap Path Coefficients for CSR Perception Model – MTN Nigeria

<b>Predictor Construct</b>	<b><math>\beta</math> Estimate</b>	<b>t-value (approx.)</b>	<b>95% CI (Lower, Upper)</b>	<b>p (Bootstrap)</b>
<b>Sustainable Development</b>	0.02	< 1.96	-0.06, 0.10	.642
<b>Social Concern</b>	-0.06	< 1.96	-0.15, 0.03	.189
<b>Environmental Concern</b>	0.40	> 2.58	0.27, 0.54	.002 **
<b>Ethical Concern</b>	0.47	> 3.29	0.34, 0.61	< .001 ***
<b>Community Engagement</b>	0.05	< 1.96	-0.03, 0.13	.294
<b>Appropriateness of CSR</b>	-0.01	< 1.96	-0.10, 0.08	.778

*Note.* Results are based on 5,000 bootstrap resamples.  $\beta$  = standardized path coefficient.

\*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001.

Table 4.7 and 4.8, respectively, provide a summary of the bootstrap PLS-SEM estimates for Dangote Cement PLC (DCP) and MTN Nigeria, along with the t-values, p-values, and confidence intervals used to evaluate the significance of the path coefficients ( $\beta$ ). These values' inclusion offers solid proof from the study constructs, supporting hypothesis testing and emphasizing how ethical and environmental factors influence attitudes toward corporate social responsibility.

Testing the proposed connections between the independent constructs—Sustainable Development, Community Engagement, Environmental Concern, Ethical Concern, Social Concern, and Appropriateness of CSR—and the dependent construct, CSR Perception, is the main goal of the results in the above tables. The four hypotheses (H1–H4) formulated for this study were tested using the  $\beta$  coefficients, CIs, p-values, and approximate t-values for both MTN and Dangote. The results of the structured hypothesis testing derived from the data analysis, are presented below.

#### 4.4.4 Hypothesis Testing

**H1:** *Public perceptions of CSR activities of MTN and Dangote Cement Plc are positively associated with their perceived contributions to sustainable development in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria.*

This hypothesis is *not supported*. For both DCP ( $\beta = 0.05$ ,  $t \approx 1.24$ ,  $p = .214$ , CI [-0.03, 0.13]) and MTN ( $\beta = 0.02$ ,  $t \approx 0.47$ ,  $p = .642$ , CI [-0.06, 0.10]). Although weak and statistically insignificant, the relationships between CSR perception and sustainable development were positive. Because of the limited visibility or perceived impact of firm-led initiatives, these results imply that communities do not strongly associate corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities with concrete contributions to sustainable development.

**H2:** *Community engagement through participatory communication is positively associated with public perceptions of the sustainable development outcomes of CSR initiatives in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria.*

This hypothesis is also *not supported*. For DCP ( $\beta = 0.05$ ,  $t \approx 1.09$ ,  $p = .278$ , CI [-0.04, 0.14]) and MTN ( $\beta = 0.05$ ,  $t \approx 1.05$ ,  $p = .294$ , CI [-0.03, 0.13]). The effects of community engagement were marginal and not statistically significant. These findings suggest that communities may not view participatory mechanisms as strong or authentic enough to affect their overall assessment of CSR outcomes, despite engagement being a key component of CSR.

**H3:** *Environmental sustainability CSR initiatives are positively associated with public perceptions of their contribution to sustainable development in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria.*

This hypothesis is **supported** for both firms. Environmental concern significantly predicted CSR perception for DCP ( $\beta = 0.39$ ,  $t \approx 3.00$ ,  $p = .004$ , CI [0.25, 0.53]) and MTN ( $\beta = 0.40$ ,  $t \approx 3.12$ ,  $p = .002$ , CI [0.27, 0.54]). These findings demonstrate the strong correlation between how communities perceive corporate social responsibility's contribution to sustainable development and outwardly visible environmental initiatives like sanitation campaigns, forest preservation, and anti-pollution campaigns.

**H4:** *Ethical CSR practices (e.g., transparency, accountability, corruption-free conduct) are positively associated with public perceptions of sustainable development outcomes in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria.*

This hypothesis is **strongly supported**. Ethical concern emerged as the strongest predictor of CSR perception in both firms: DCP ( $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $t \approx 5.30$ ,  $p < .001$ , CI [0.32, 0.59]) and MTN ( $\beta = 0.47$ ,  $t \approx 5.55$ ,  $p < .001$ , CI [0.34, 0.61]). These results show that public perceptions of CSR's developmental value are significantly influenced by ethical business practices, especially those that are free from corruption and involve accountability and responsibility to stakeholders.

In conclusion, H1 and H2: Not supported (both CSR perception → sustainable development and community engagement → CSR perception were weak and insignificant).

H3 and H4: Supported (ethical and environmental concerns have a significant and positive impact on both firms' perception of CSR).

## **Chapter 5**

# **DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.1 Chapter Overview**

The study's findings are integrated in this chapter; it highlights how ethical business practices and environmental sustainability are the main factors influencing public opinions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. The analysis emphasizes that although environmental responsibility and ethical behavior greatly increase CSR credibility, public relations tactics that don't truly engage the community or don't follow sustainable development principles are frequently seen as shallow, which lowers their perceived developmental value. Drawing conclusions from the empirical data, the chapter answers the research questions and revisited the hypotheses again. It also describes the study's theoretical and practical implications, provides practical recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, and private sector firms, and points to directions for further research to enhance the contribution of corporate social responsibility (CSR) to sustainable development in Nigeria and similar settings.

## 5.2 Discussion

This section discusses the findings derived from the PLS-SEM analysis of Likert scale data collected from survey participants regarding their perception of Dangote Cement PLC (DCP) and MTN Nigeria CSR practices. The results are examined in relation to the research questions that guided this study. Although they do not form the main substantive findings, the inclusion of measurement model evaluation indices, such as explained variance ( $R^2$ ), Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ), composite reliability ( $\rho_C$ ), average variance extracted (AVE), Dijkstra-Henseler's  $\rho_A$ , and Fornell-Larcker discriminant validity, is essential for demonstrating the study's robustness. These indices attest to the validity and reliability of the constructs' measurements, guaranteeing that the results of the structural model are reliable and not the result of faulty measurement. Public perceptions of CSR's contribution to sustainable development are significantly shaped by ethical CSR practices ( $\beta = 0.46\text{--}0.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and environmental sustainability initiatives ( $\beta = 0.39\text{--}0.40$ ,  $p < .01$ ), as evidenced by the strong reliability and validity of the ethical concern and environmental concern constructs. By first verifying the strength and consistency of the measurement model, the study provides a solid foundation for interpreting these findings with confidence, thereby strengthening both the theoretical and practical implications of CSR in Nigeria's Middle Belt region.

In particular, even though both companies showed similar explanatory power ( $R^2 = 0.605$ ), the pattern of significant predictors for the explained variance ( $R^2$ ) for the CSR perception models of DCP and MTN is consistent across cases. According to this outcome, ethical and environmental factors are the primary drivers of CSR legitimacy, with community involvement, sustainable development, and philanthropy-based social concerns

contributing little to nothing. This convergence suggests that the Middle Belt public values ecological responsibility and ethical accountability more than it does firm-driven agendas or symbolic giving.

Again, the Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ), Composite Reliability ( $\rho_C$ ), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were used to evaluate internal consistency and convergent validity in order to determine the validity and reliability of the measurement model. These metrics offer a solid grasp of the construct validity and reliability of the items gauging public opinions of DCP and MTN's CSR and PR initiatives. In addition, assessing validity using Fornell-Larcker discriminant validity and reliability using Dijkstra-Henseler's  $\rho_A$  confirms that each construct is empirically distinct and internally consistent, making the study's conclusions reliable and understandable.

Before going into a detailed discussion, it is important to emphasize that public perception plays a crucial role in the success of CSR initiatives — especially in today's global business environment where stakeholders are increasingly informed and socially conscious. For private sector firms, CSR is no longer optional but a fundamental mission and an integral part of their operations essential for achieving long-term sustainability.

### **5.2.1 Sustainable Development**

The findings of this study indicate that sustainable development demonstrates very weak explanatory power in the CSR perception models for both Dangote Cement Plc ( $\beta = 0.05$ ,  $p = .214$ ) and MTN ( $\beta = 0.02$ ,  $p = .642$ ), explaining less than 5% of the variance. These non-significant results suggest that, from the perspective of communities in Nigeria's Middle Belt, CSR activities are not strongly linked to tangible developmental outcomes.

This finding highlights a gap between the expectations of sustainable development and the perceived contributions of corporate initiatives, raising concerns about whether CSR activities are sufficiently strategic or visible in addressing the region's developmental challenges.

The weak statistical relationship contrasts with the broader literature that emphasizes private sector investment as a crucial driver of productivity, inclusive growth, and employment generation (Dempere et al., 2023; Vargas Merino & Rios Lama, 2023). Prior studies affirm that CSR can play a pivotal role in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) when embedded in strategic sustainability planning (Ashurov et al., 2024; Kadhim et al., 2024). However, as Ntoutoume (2024) argues, CSR in Africa has often fallen short under voluntary frameworks, requiring adaptation to local contexts through Africa-centric and potentially mandatory CSR strategies to produce measurable impact. This position also affirms the need not only for stakeholder engagement but also the critical need to incorporate participatory communication strategies into CSR initiatives by private firms.

Further, the muted public association between CSR and sustainable development in this study may reflect that many initiatives are perceived as corporate image-building rather than transformative development efforts. Notably, however, the strong cultural emphasis on education in Nigeria suggests that education-based CSR projects—such as scholarships, skills development, and job creation—are seen as more credible and impactful compared to generic philanthropy. This supports Zhang and Hao's (2024) contention that CSR has evolved from traditional charity toward a strategic approach that

addresses pressing socio-economic and environmental challenges. Taken together, these findings underscore the need for firms to recalibrate their CSR strategies beyond tokenistic gestures and toward integrated, context-sensitive initiatives that communities can clearly link to sustainable development outcomes.

### **5.2.2 Social Concerns**

The study's findings indicate that social concerns, as assessed by corporate giving, sponsorships, and philanthropic gestures, showed weak and non-significant relationships with CSR perception for both companies: MTN ( $\beta = -0.06$ ,  $p = .189$ ) and Dangote Cement Plc ( $\beta = -0.08$ ,  $p = .118$ ). From the viewpoint of local communities in Nigeria's Middle Belt, these social initiatives appear to be weakly linked to significant contributions to sustainable development, as indicated by the negative coefficients and lack of statistical significance. Instead, these initiatives might be seen as tokenistic or unrelated to more fundamental structural requirements, which would limit their ability to influence how the general public views corporate social responsibility.

This finding contrasts with arguments that highlight the social dimension as one of CSR's most critical contributions. Salam (2024) observes that CSR awareness has created new opportunities for firms to engage with global social challenges, while Pouresmaieli et al. (2024) stress that CSR's most pronounced impacts are often felt in the social sphere. However, the gap between this potential and the community perceptions captured in this study indicates a misalignment between the types of social interventions firms emphasize and the forms of social investment that communities consider credible and transformative.

When assessed against the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this misalignment becomes even more evident. While the public strongly values CSR initiatives linked to SDG 1 (No Poverty), such as poverty reduction, job creation, and inclusive business practices (Ashurov et al., (2024; Scherer et al., 2013), these were not clearly associated with CSR perception in the present study. Similarly, programs addressing SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education)—which the literature identifies as essential for sustainable development (Le et al., 2024; Ha et al., 2024)—did not emerge as significant predictors in the models for either firm, despite their cultural and developmental importance in Nigeria. Moreover, the limited effect of socially focused CSR initiatives also echoes Bian et al.'s (2025) warning that a lack of genuine stakeholder inclusion and community engagement often undermines the effectiveness of such programs, leaving them vulnerable to perceptions of superficiality. This outcome and assertion again corroborate the participatory communication that emphasizes inclusivity and participation.

Overall, these findings suggest that while social engagement is valued in principle, its effectiveness in shaping CSR perceptions depends heavily on its design and relevance. Communities appear to prioritize initiatives that directly address enduring socio-economic challenges—such as poverty alleviation, education, healthcare, and social inclusion (SDGs 1, 3, 4, and 10)—over symbolic acts like event sponsorships or cultural patronage. In other words, for CSR to be perceived as socially impactful, it must transcend tokenistic philanthropy and demonstrate tangible, long-term contributions to human development.

### **5.2.3 Environmental Concerns**

The results of this study demonstrate that environmental concerns are a statistically significant predictor of CSR perception for both Dangote Cement Plc ( $\beta = 0.39$ ,  $p = .004$ ) and MTN ( $\beta = 0.40$ ,  $p = .002$ ), accounting for nearly 40% of the variance in public perceptions. This moderate yet robust explanatory power highlights that communities in Nigeria's Middle Belt strongly associate CSR with visible and tangible environmental initiatives, such as sanitation campaigns, forest preservation, and anti-pollution programs. These findings suggest that when firms take deliberate steps to protect the natural environment, they earn greater legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of the public.

This outcome is consistent with global trends where stakeholders increasingly demand corporate accountability for environmental sustainability (Khurshid et al., 2025; Fu et al., 2023). As Jaroensombut et al. (2025) note, firms are responding through innovations such as compliance with emissions standards, improvements in energy efficiency, and investments in renewable energy. Within the Nigerian context, such initiatives are particularly valued given the visible challenges of deforestation, pollution, and inadequate waste management. The results also resonate with Stakeholder Theory, which emphasizes that firms have responsibilities not only to shareholders but also to broader stakeholder groups—including local communities and the natural environment. By addressing ecological concerns, firms demonstrate responsiveness to these wider stakeholder expectations, thereby reinforcing public trust and social legitimacy.

In all, the strong path coefficients for environmental concerns affirm that environmentally focused CSR initiatives are central to shaping public perception of sustainable

development contributions. Beyond enhancing reputational capital, these initiatives are viewed by communities as vital to long-term sustainability outcomes. Thus, environmental stewardship is not merely an optional add-on to CSR strategy but a core driver of corporate legitimacy and community acceptance in Nigeria's Middle Belt.

#### **5.2.4 Ethical Concerns**

The findings reveal that ethical concerns are the strongest predictor of CSR perception across both firms, with Dangote Cement Plc ( $\beta = 0.46, p < .001$ ) and MTN ( $\beta = 0.47, p < .001$ ) explaining nearly half of the variance in how communities perceive CSR practices. This underscores the centrality of ethical conduct—such as transparency, accountability, and corruption-free practices—in shaping public trust and CSR legitimacy in Nigeria's Middle Belt region. Respondents clearly attach greater weight to visible ethical commitments than to philanthropic gestures or symbolic social activities, suggesting that integrity and responsibility are non-negotiable elements of credible CSR.

These results resonate with the warnings of Ashurov et al. (2024) and Camilleri (2024), who caution that CSR risks being reduced to a branding exercise when divorced from genuine ethical engagement. Particularly in the Nigeria contexts where corruption and governance failures are prevalent, communities are especially sensitive to perceived misconduct, such as tax evasion or bribery, which can quickly erode a firm's credibility. This aligns with the insights of Jamali and Karam (2018) and Windsor (2006), who stress that CSR must be anchored in normative ethical values to fulfill its transformative potential. From the lens of Corporate Social Responsibility Theory, this finding emphasizes that firms' obligations extend beyond legal compliance or reputation

management; they must act responsibly toward all stakeholders in ways that promote fairness, integrity, and social well-being.

Altogether, the strong path coefficients for ethical concerns highlight that CSR initiatives rooted in authentic ethical responsibility—not simply profit-driven or symbolic gestures—are critical to building trust and reinforcing public perceptions of private firms as genuine agents of sustainable development. By embedding ethics at the core of CSR strategy, firms can move beyond compliance to foster deeper stakeholder engagement and contribute meaningfully to societal transformation in line with sustainable development goals.

### **5.2.5 Community Engagement**

The results of this study indicate that community engagement has weak and statistically non-significant effects on CSR perception for both Dangote Cement Plc ( $\beta = 0.05$ ,  $p = .278$ ) and MTN ( $\beta = 0.05$ ,  $p = .294$ ), with explanatory power of barely 5%. These findings suggest that, although firms engage in community-related CSR activities, such efforts are not strongly shaping how communities perceive the developmental value of CSR. The results reveal a gap between recognition of engagement practices and their translation into perceived sustainable development outcomes, pointing to limitations in the scope, communication, or alignment of these initiatives.

This outcome contrasts with Jaroensombut et al. (2025), who stress that community participation is vital for effective CSR, and with Abbas (2025), who argues that authentic stakeholder engagement requires moving beyond symbolic models toward inclusive, participatory approaches. Tawiah et al. ((2025) similarly emphasize that CSR engagement

must be consistent, culturally relevant, and tailored to the development priorities of host communities—especially where firms depend on local goodwill to sustain their operations (Farooq et al., 2014). From the perspective of Participatory Communication Theory, the weak structural relationship in this study signals that CSR engagement practices may not be sufficiently co-designed or inclusive to resonate as credible with the communities. This implies that firms' current strategies risk being perceived as consultative formalities rather than genuine platforms for shared value creation.

In general, the findings highlight a disconnect between the intent and perception of CSR engagement efforts. Communities expect involvement and place high value on participatory practices (Saenz, 2024), yet they do not perceive current initiatives as contributing meaningfully to long-term development. To bridge this gap, firms must rethink their CSR communication and engagement strategies, ensuring that initiatives are participatory, impact-driven, and strategically aligned with local priorities and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Without such recalibration, community engagement risks remaining symbolic, with limited influence on CSR perception and sustainable development outcomes.

#### **5.2.6 Inclusivity and Appropriateness of CSR**

The findings of this study reveal that appropriateness of CSR exerts virtually no explanatory power on CSR perception, with Dangote Cement Plc ( $\beta = -0.00$ ,  $p = .951$ ) and MTN ( $\beta = -0.01$ ,  $p = .778$ ) showing weak and non-significant relationships. These negative values indicate that, from the perspective of communities in Nigeria's Middle Belt, CSR initiatives are often not perceived as well-aligned with local needs or priorities. This disconnect suggests that while firms may implement CSR programs, these are not

always seen as relevant, impactful, or transformative in addressing the region's socio-economic and environmental challenges.

This finding resonates with Opoku Marfo's (2024) observation that CSR efforts lacking alignment with stakeholder expectations often produce superficial outcomes, failing to deliver meaningful developmental impact. Similarly, Ha et al. (2024) highlight that misalignment leads to "contested CSR," where communities distrust or reject initiatives they perceive as disconnected from lived realities. From the perspective of Stakeholder Theory, the results emphasize that legitimacy and trust are earned when organizations actively engage stakeholders—particularly host communities—in shaping CSR priorities and interventions. As Osagie (2017) and Adekola and Uzoagu (2012) argue, inclusive stakeholder involvement in decision-making ensures that CSR activities are not only credible but also capable of addressing community-specific needs in ways that foster sustainable development.

The lack of significance in this study may reflect a broader critique of CSR in African contexts as largely performative (Opoku Marfo, 2024), where initiatives are guided by reputational motives rather than authentic commitment to societal concerns. Conversely, when CSR initiatives are designed collaboratively and reflect genuine inclusivity, they foster trust, enhance community ownership, and increase the likelihood of long-term success (Kamara, 2022). As Scherer et al. (2013) note, organizations earn greater legitimacy when their actions resonate with societal expectations across social, environmental, and economic dimensions.

Largely, these results underscore that for CSR to be perceived as appropriate and impactful, firms must move beyond tokenistic philanthropy toward purpose-driven, participatory, and strategically aligned initiatives. Only through genuine collaboration with communities can CSR efforts achieve the relevance, inclusivity, and sustainability required to strengthen developmental outcomes in Nigeria's Middle Belt region.

### **5.2.7 Corporate Social Responsibility Perception**

The results of this study demonstrate that ethical behavior and environmental responsibility have the greatest influence on public opinions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in Nigeria's Middle Belt, whereas social concerns, community engagement, and the appropriateness of CSR have little to no impact. This finding is consistent with past research that highlights the importance of ethical integrity and environmental stewardship in determining the legitimacy of CSR (Ashurov et al., 2024; Emeka-Okoli et al., 2024). However, the weak path coefficients for community engagement ( $\beta = 0.05$ ,  $p > .05$ ) draw attention to a significant flaw in the Middle Belt region's current CSR practice: it is primarily top-down. This frequently falls short of empowering communities through participatory approaches or reflecting local priorities. CSR initiatives run the risk of being viewed as meaningless, superficial, or disjointed from sustainable development objectives of the region as a result.

Going by the *Participatory Communication Theory*, the lack of community engagement indicates that CSR in the area is not yet based on inclusive discussion or collaborative decision-making, which erodes community ownership and trust (Servaes and Malikha, 2005; Mefalopulos, 2008). CSR needs to shift from one-way information sharing to participatory methods that incorporate community opinions into project planning and

execution in order to close this gap. Similarly, the study's adoption of the *Corporate Social Responsibility Theory* highlights that CSR should represent true corporate commitments to social, environmental, and economic well-being rather than just being used for regulatory compliance or reputational purposes (Carroll, 2016; Visser, 2011). CSR projects that are designed in accordance with normative ethical standards and environmental responsibilities resonate more strongly with community expectations and meet the global need for environmental sustainability, explaining the study's strong effects on ethical and environmental concerns.

Again, the Stakeholder Theory that served as part of the foundation for this study offers a helpful framework for understanding why different constructs have different perceptions of CSR. According to stakeholder theorists, responding to the needs and interests of various stakeholders—not just shareholders—is essential to a company's legitimacy (Awa et al., 2024; Jamali and Karam, 2018). The study's weak correlations between CSR perception and community engagement/appropriateness imply that businesses are not sufficiently involving stakeholders in setting priorities, which reduces the initiatives' credibility and potential for development. On the other hand, the strong role of environmental and ethical commitments reflects areas where firms' actions are more visible and stakeholder expectations are clearer, which strengthens legitimacy.

Ultimately, these results support the necessity of redefining CSR as a strategic communication technique. CSR activities must be transparent, participatory, and pertinent to the context in order to improve public perception and promote sustainable development. Companies should ensure that CSR reflects genuine corporate values in line with the

Sustainable Development Goals of the UN, co-create programmes with communities, and produce quantifiable and verifiable results (UN, 2024). By doing this, private sector firm in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria can build relationships with stakeholders, promote trust, and establish themselves as reliable partners in local and national development.

### **5.3 Discussion of Research Questions**

#### **5.3.1 Public Perception of CSR and PR Practices on Sustainable Development**

*RQ1: What are public perceptions on the impact of CSR strategies vis-à-vis PR practices of private sector firms on sustainable development in the Middle Belt Region of Nigeria?*

The public perception on the impact of CSR strategies of private firms reveals that the most important predictors of credible corporate social responsibility are ethical behavior and environmental stewardship. In other words, PR campaigns and CSR strategies that prioritize ethics and obvious environmental action are viewed most favorably and impact more on sustainable development, whereas publicity-driven PR or one-time charitable donations are viewed as poor indicators of the impact on sustainable development. This is clear from the results, which show that ethical concern is the strongest predictor of CSR perception ( $\beta_{\text{DCP}} = 0.46$ ,  $\beta_{\text{MTN}} = 0.47$ ;  $p < .001$ ; 95% CI positive). Environmental concern is the next most significant predictor ( $\beta_{\text{DCP}} = 0.39$ ,  $\beta_{\text{MTN}} = 0.40$ ;  $p < .01$ ). In contrast, indicators of community-oriented PR and sustainable development demonstrated insignificant effects ( $\beta \approx 0.02\text{--}0.05$ ,  $p > .05$ ). About 60.5% of the variation in CSR perception can be explained by the overall model ( $R^2 = 0.605$ ) — see Figure 4.3 (standardized coefficients) and the  $R^2$  chart (p101).

This pattern of results is consistent with CSR Theory, which highlights that substantive commitments, not image-making, are the foundation of CSR credibility (Visser, 2011; Ashurov et al., (2024). The results also support the *Stakeholder Theory*, which emphasizes that firms that adhere to environmental and ethical standards are rewarded by stakeholders (Jamali and Karam, 2018). Further, it highlights the limitations of one-way PR: PR that only broadcasts activities does not translate into perceptions of developmental impact in the absence of participatory processes (Participatory Communication Theory) (Servaes and Malikhao, 2005).

### **5.3.2 Appropriateness and Perceived Benefits of CSR and PR Activities**

*RQ2: How does the public perceive the appropriateness and benefits of the public relations tools in relation to the sustainable development practices of private sector firms?*

Many PR tools are viewed by the public as inadequate on their own; especially when initiatives lack authentic participatory design and measurable developmental outcomes, the perceived appropriateness and benefits of PR-mediated CSR are low. In particular, there was no explanatory power for the appropriateness of CSR (DCP  $R^2 = -0.004$ ; MTN  $R^2 = -0.013$ ; path  $\beta \approx -0.00$  to  $-0.01$ ,  $p >.05$ ). Further, small, non-significant path coefficients ( $\beta \approx 0.05$  for both firms,  $p >.05$ ) were exhibited by community engagement/participatory PR. According to the bootstrap tables (pp. 117–118) and comparison plot (p. 112), these findings show that communities do not view PR efforts as intrinsically helpful unless they are coupled with ethical conduct and observable environmental or development results.

Interpreting these results through the lens of Participatory Communication Theory suggests that for PR to be deemed appropriate and useful, it must be reciprocal and collaborative (Mefalopulos, 2008). Again, according to Stakeholder Theory, PR must engage stakeholders in a meaningful way or risk being perceived as window dressing for one's reputation (Hahn et al., 2024). To boost perceived benefits, PR tools should, in practice, support transparent reporting and community co-design (Zhang and Hao, 2024).

### **5.3.3 CSR, Development Communication, and the SDGs**

**RQ3:** *What is the relationship among corporate social responsibility initiatives, sustainable development practices, and development communication in Nigeria's private sector firms in line with the UN SDGs?*

The study's findings indicate that in order to link CSR to SDG outcomes, development communication—which includes stakeholder-centered and participatory communication—needs to be strengthened as a mediating mechanism. However, the strongest connections between CSR initiatives and sustainable development are found in the ethical and environmental domains. The results of this study, for example, demonstrate that the majority of the variance in CSR perception can be explained by the combination of ethical and environmental constructs (environmental effect sizes in the model were approximately 39–40%, while ethical effect sizes were approximately 46–47%). On the other hand, the Sustainable Development composite and the constructs that represent development communication (community engagement, appropriateness) exhibit very low explanatory power (Sustainable Development  $\beta$  small; community engagement  $\beta \approx 0.05$ ). This suggests that although CSR initiatives can help achieve SDG-aligned results, communities believe that only ethical and environmentally focused initiatives are

contributing in a meaningful way; there is a dearth of participatory development communication that would convert business operations into acknowledged SDG impact.

The study's integrated perspective is based on three theories: Stakeholder Theory (which emphasizes the importance of stakeholder inclusion for legitimacy and SDG alignment), Participatory Communication Theory (which predicts that co-created communication is necessary to legitimize and translate CSR into observable development gains), and CSR Theory (which links firm practices to SDGs when strategic and substantive). The outcome supports UN recommendations that for real development impact, CSR must be quantifiable, locally relevant, and in line with SDG indicators (UN, 2024).

#### **5.3.4 Impact of Environmental Sustainability CSR Initiatives**

**RQ4:** *What are the impacts of environmental sustainability CSR initiatives of private sector firms on sustainable development in Nigeria?*

The results of this study show that public perceptions of CSR's contribution to sustainable development are positively, clearly, and statistically significantly impacted by environmental sustainability initiatives. Visible environmental action is rewarded by communities, making it a powerful tool for CSR to promote sustainability objectives. According to the study's statistical evidence, CSR perception is significantly predicted by environmental concern (DCP  $\beta = 0.39$ ,  $p = .004$ ; MTN  $\beta = 0.40$ ,  $p = .002$ ; 95% CIs exclude zero). Credible CSR contributions are linked by communities to sanitation campaigns, pollution prevention, and preservation initiatives. Environmental initiatives have a stronger correlation with perceived developmental outcomes than social or participatory measures because they are more visible (see Figure 4.3 and bootstrap plots).

The study's findings is in line with the stakeholder theory, which holds that stakeholders demand environmental responsibility, and the corporate social responsibility (CSR) theory, which emphasizes the importance of environmental stewardship in contemporary CSR strategies (Ashurov et al., 2024; Emeka-Okoli et al., 2024; Jaroensombut et al., 2025). Environmental action is currently the primary route from corporate social responsibility (CSR) to perceived sustainable development, but the use of participatory practices to co-design environmental projects would further increase impact (Servaes, 2022).

#### **5.4 Discussion on Hypotheses**

The most significant predictors of CSR perception, according to the results of the bootstrap path coefficients for Dangote Cement Plc (DCP), are environmental concern ( $\beta = 0.39$ ,  $t > 2.58$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and ethical concern ( $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $t > 3.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The significance that communities place on accountability, transparency, and conduct free from corruption in forming their assessment of corporate social responsibility is highlighted by the powerful explanatory power of ethical concern. Similarly, the importance of environmental concerns implies that projects like sustainability campaigns, sanitation programs, and forest preservation are seen as concrete and legitimate CSR endeavors. Other constructs, such as social concern, community engagement, sustainable development, and the appropriateness of CSR, produced non-significant results ( $t < 1.96$ ,  $p > .05$ ), indicating a weak or insignificant influence on perceptions of CSR.

A similar pattern shows up for MTN Nigeria. Once more, the two most powerful and important factors influencing how people perceive CSR are ethical concern ( $\beta = 0.47$ ,  $t > 3.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and environmental concern ( $\beta = 0.40$ ,  $t > 2.58$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This similarity

between the two firms supports the claim that the ethical conduct of businesses and the obvious environmental effects of their projects are the main ways that communities in the Middle Belt Region assess the credibility of CSR. On the other hand, perceptions of CSR were not significantly impacted by contributions to sustainable development ( $\beta = 0.02$ ,  $t < 1.96$ ,  $p = .642$ ), social concern ( $\beta = -0.06$ ,  $t < 1.96$ ,  $p = .189$ ), or community engagement ( $\beta = 0.05$ ,  $t < 1.96$ ,  $p = .294$ ), and the appropriateness of CSR remained insignificant ( $\beta = -0.01$ ,  $t < 1.96$ ,  $p = .778$ ).

In summary, these results, which were used to test the hypotheses, indicate that while philanthropic or development-oriented contributions are frequently highlighted by CSR in Nigeria's private sector, communities place more value on environmental stewardship and ethical integrity when forming opinions about corporate responsibility. There is also a gap between corporate initiatives and community-defined, participatory priorities, as evidenced by the smaller or non-significant influence of constructs like community engagement and the appropriateness of CSR. This supports earlier criticisms that CSR in developing contexts is philanthropic and top-down rather than participatory and developmental.

## **5.5 Summary and Conclusion**

With an emphasis on how the public views MTN Nigeria and Dangote Cement Plc, this study critically investigated how private sector companies' CSR initiatives support sustainable development in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. With CSR perception as the dependent variable, the study used the outcome of online survey ( $N = 623$ ), based on a 5-point Likert scale and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Anchored on Participatory Communication Theory, CSR Theory, and Stakeholder

Theory, the study assesses six latent constructs: sustainable development, environmental concerns, social concerns, ethical concerns, community engagement, and appropriateness of CSR.

The results show that the two strongest predictors of CSR perception across both firms are environmental concerns ( $\beta = 0.39\text{--}0.40$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $R^2 \approx 0.39\text{--}0.40$ ) and ethical concerns ( $\beta = 0.46\text{--}0.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $R^2 \approx 0.46\text{--}0.47$ ). These findings demonstrate the importance of openness, responsibility, and environmental stewardship in establishing legitimacy and public trust, particularly in an area where environmental degradation and corruption are still major issues. In contrast, the appropriateness of CSR demonstrated negligible or negative variance explained ( $R^2 < 0$ ), while sustainable development ( $R^2 = 0.017\text{--}0.048$ ) and community engagement ( $R^2 = 0.050\text{--}0.052$ ) showed weak explanatory power. This implies that despite businesses' claims to engage communities and support development, these initiatives are frequently top-down, poorly communicated, or not sufficiently in line with local priorities.

The study also found that although social CSR activities (such as sponsorships and philanthropy) are appreciated, they are not seen as transformative unless they specifically address important development needs like healthcare, education, and poverty alleviation. Reiterating that communities favour CSR initiatives that address systemic injustices over symbolic or image-driven interventions, this is consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals.

The findings theoretically support the integration of Stakeholder Theory, which frames legitimacy as contingent on the recognition and involvement of affected communities; CSR Theory, which emphasizes embedding ethics and sustainability in business strategy; and Participatory Communication Theory, which emphasizes the need for inclusive, co-created CSR. Collectively, these viewpoints highlight the need for CSR to change from philanthropic rhetoric to ethically sound, environmentally conscious, and participatory practices.

To sum up, this study adds theoretical and empirical perspectives to CSR research and practice. According to empirical evidence, ethics and the environment emerge as the most reliable levers of legitimacy, and CSR perception models account for more than 60% of the variance ( $R^2 = 0.605$ ). According to theory, corporate social responsibility (CSR) should not be viewed as a corporate image exercise but rather as a strategic communication process based on inclusivity, dialogue, and sustainability. To ensure that CSR in Nigeria's Middle Belt moves from tokenistic philanthropy to genuine, transformative development practice, the evidence emphasizes the urgency for policymakers and practitioners to mandate participatory frameworks that are in line with CSR, the SDGs, and local priorities.

Table 5.1: Summary of Constructs, Definitions, and Measurement Indicators Used in the Study

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Definition (Study Context)</b>	<b>Role in Model</b>	<b>Measured Indicators (Survey Items)</b>	<b>Linkages (Empirical/Theoretical)</b>
<b>Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Perception</b>	Public perception of firms' CSR activities, including ethical, social, and environmental dimensions.	Endogenous (Dependent)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Overall perception of CSR initiatives</li> <li>•Trust in firm's CSR efforts</li> <li>•Belief that CSR addresses real community needs</li> </ul>	Shaped by environmental, social, ethical concerns, community engagement, and appropriateness of CSR initiatives.
<b>Sustainable Development</b>	Perceived contribution of firms' CSR initiatives to long-term social, economic, and environmental goals.	Endogenous (Dependent)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•CSR contribution to education/health</li> <li>•CSR role in economic empowerment</li> <li>•CSR role in environmental sustainability</li> </ul>	Linked to CSR perception; rooted in CSR Theory and SDGs framework.
<b>Environmental Concern</b>	Public assessment of how firms address ecological sustainability through CSR (e.g., pollution control, green initiatives).	Exogenous (Independent)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Efforts to reduce pollution</li> <li>•Waste management practices</li> <li>•Adoption of environmentally friendly projects</li> </ul>	Positively associated with CSR perception and sustainable development outcomes.
<b>Social Concern</b>	Perceived extent to which CSR addresses social welfare issues (education, health, poverty alleviation, equity).	Exogenous (Independent)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•CSR contribution to healthcare</li> <li>•CSR support for education</li> <li>•CSR role in poverty reduction and equity</li> </ul>	Linked to CSR perception; reflects CSR Theory and Stakeholder Theory focus on societal welfare.
<b>Ethical Concern</b>	Public evaluation of firms' ethical	Exogenous (Independent)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Transparency of CSR processes</li> <li>•Accountability in</li> </ul>	Strong predictor of CSR perception and sustainability;

	practices (transparency, accountability, anti-corruption, fairness).		CSR fund usage •Corruption-free and fair practices	grounded in CSR Theory and Stakeholder Theory.
<b>Community Engagement</b>	Perception of how firms engage local communities through participatory and inclusive communication in CSR.	Exogenous (Independent)	•Opportunities for community input •Dialogue between firm and community •Collaboration in CSR project design	Central to Participatory Communication Theory; enhances CSR legitimacy and perceived development contributions.
<b>Appropriateness of CSR</b>	Degree to which CSR initiatives are viewed as relevant, suitable, and aligned with community needs.	Exogenous (Independent)	•CSR relevance to local context •Suitability of CSR to pressing needs •Alignment with community priorities	Influences CSR perception by bridging firm with stakeholder expectations (Stakeholder Theory).

Table 5.1 provides a comprehensive overview of all constructs, presenting both the conceptual and measurement frameworks based on the 5-point Likert scale. It also illustrates how the constructs are linked to CSR, development communication, and sustainable development.

## 5.6 Implications of the Study and Recommendations

The study offers the following practical and policy-relevant insights and recommendations.

### **5.6.1 Policy Implications**

While sustainable development ( $R^2 = 0.017\text{--}0.048$ ) and community engagement ( $R^2 = 0.050\text{--}0.052$ ) exhibit weak explanatory power, the results show that ethical concerns ( $R^2 = 0.460\text{--}0.471$ ) and environmental concerns ( $R^2 = 0.392\text{--}0.397$ ) strongly shape CSR perception in Nigeria's Middle Belt. These findings suggest a policy gap where communities already find resonance in ethical and environmental frameworks, but where CSR practices related to engagement and development are performing poorly. This can be used by policymakers to improve accountability systems, create rewards for environmental stewardship, and offer more precise instructions for participatory planning that better connects CSR activities to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

### **5.6.2 Theoretical Implications**

There are three main ways that this study contributes to theoretical discourse. First, the insignificant structural impact of community engagement in spite of its high measurement reliability points to a weakness in Participatory Communication Theory: communication by itself does not ensure developmental impact unless it is converted into inclusive decision-making and initiative co-ownership. Second, the importance of ethical and environmental concerns supports CSR Theory by demonstrating that open, value-driven practices that are in line with sustainability requirements are the true source of legitimacy and favorable public perception rather than charitable deeds. Third, while the theory stresses alignment with stakeholder needs, this study shows that alignment is frequently rhetorical rather than substantive, raising questions about how stakeholder voices are operationalized in CSR planning. The mixed results on appropriateness of CSR (negative  $R^2$  values) also point to an inconsistency within Stakeholder Theory. Collectively, these

observations highlight the need for all three theories to be applied in more complex, context-sensitive ways in African CSR research.

### **5.6.3 Implications for Firms**

Empirically, the study demonstrates that while initiatives presented as philanthropy or symbolic engagement are viewed as having less impact, communities in the Middle Belt place the highest value on obvious ethical behavior and environmental responsibility. This demonstrates how poorly matched CSR strategies with local needs can harm a firm's reputation. Even when projects do exist, communities may perceive them as being unrelated to real development priorities due to the lack of explanatory power for CSR's appropriateness. This suggests that for businesses, incorporating CSR into participatory planning frameworks is necessary to establish legitimacy and trust while guaranteeing relevance, visibility, and quantifiable community benefits.

### **5.6.4 Recommendations**

Several evidence-based recommendations are derived from the findings of this study:

- ***Sustainable Development***: By collaborating with local communities, CSR projects that support SDG priorities in employment, skill development, and education may gain more recognition and legitimacy.
- ***Social Concerns***: Sponsorships and philanthropy can be redirected toward context-specific initiatives that tackle systemic community needs, like healthcare, inclusion, and poverty reduction.
- ***Environmental Concerns***: Community-driven, locally relevant projects (such as pollution control, reforestation, and sanitation drives) can strengthen corporate sustainability pledges and public trust.

- ***Ethical Concerns***: The best way to maintain trust and establish CSR as developmentally credible is to incorporate transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption into CSR strategies.
- ***Community Engagement***: One way to achieve greater developmental legitimacy is to reframe engagement from symbolic consultation to participatory co-design and co-implementation.
- ***Appropriateness and Inclusivity***: Adapting CSR to community-identified priorities promotes long-term alignment with sustainability objectives and increases ownership.
- ***CSR in its entirety***: Reorienting toward CSR as a transparent, participatory, and ethically based strategic communication process can improve developmental impact and build public trust.

## **5.7 Limitations of the Study**

A number of limitations should be acknowledged, even though this study provides valuable insights into how the general public in Nigeria's Middle Belt views corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices by private sector firms and its connection to sustainable development.

***Geographic scope***: Because of the Middle Belt region's emphasis, the results capture the socioeconomic and cultural realities of this particular setting. Because Nigeria's various geopolitical zones may exhibit distinct socio-economic and environmental dynamics, the findings cannot be extrapolated to the entire nation.

***Firm choice:*** Two well-known companies, Dangote Cement PLC (DCP) and MTN Nigeria, were the focus of the investigation. Even though they are powerful players due to their size and notoriety, their CSR policies might not be typical of all private sector businesses, especially smaller or less well-known businesses in other sectors.

***Cross-sectional design:*** Because the study only used data gathered at one particular moment, it was unable to fully capture changing public attitudes or the long-term effects of CSR programmes. Deeper understanding of changes over time may be possible with a longitudinal design.

***Sample size and representativeness:*** Despite being statistically sufficient for PLS-SEM analysis, the sample size is still small when compared to the Middle Belt's population, which is over 17 million. Some viewpoints might not have been adequately represented, particularly those from underrepresented groups.

***Digital access and inclusion:*** Online surveys were the main method used to collect data. The responses may not have been as representative because of this reliance on digital platforms, which may have excluded people without dependable internet access, especially in rural or underserved areas.

***Non-Probability Sampling Techniques:*** Purposive and snowball sampling are two non-probability sampling strategies used in this study to guarantee the participation of key stakeholders and respondents who possess pertinent knowledge of CSR practices and sustainable development in the communities they are intended for. These techniques limited the findings' generalizability because the sample might not accurately reflect the

larger population, even though they made it possible to carefully choose participants who could offer rich and insightful data from the Middle Belt Region.

## **5.8 Recommendations for Future Research**

To build upon the insights and address the limitations of this study, the following areas are recommended for future research:

*Longitudinal and Mixed-Methods Approaches:* Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs to track changes in public perception and the long-term impact of CSR initiatives. Incorporating mixed-methods research would also allow for a richer, more comprehensive understanding of how CSR influences community well-being and development, especially when diverse stakeholder voices are included across Nigeria's geopolitical zones.

*Sectoral and Comparative Analysis:* Expanding the scope to include a broader range of firms across sectors—such as telecommunications, extractive industries, manufacturing, and agriculture—would offer a more nuanced view of CSR practices and their developmental outcomes. Comparative studies across industries could help identify sector-specific strengths and challenges in CSR implementation.

*Public-Private Collaboration Models:* There is a growing need to explore synergistic relationships between government institutions and private firms in co-creating sustainable development strategies. Research into such collaborative governance models such as the public-private partnerships could reveal innovative frameworks for scaling CSR impact in resource-constrained environments like Nigeria.

*Media Influence on CSR Perception:* Future research should examine the role of traditional and social media in shaping public understanding and trust in CSR initiatives. Investigating how media framing, agenda-setting, and public relations practices influence CSR legitimacy would deepen insights into the communication strategies that enhance or undermine stakeholder engagement.

*Ethical Indicators and Cultural Relevance:* Subsequent studies should aim to align ethical CSR indicators more closely with localized values and community expectations. Evaluating cultural and contextual variations in CSR perception across regions and firm types would help tailor CSR strategies to resonate more authentically with target communities.

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## **APPENDICES**

## Appendix A: Likert Scale Survey

### Section A

Dear Respondent,

I am a Ph.D. researcher in the Faculty of Communication and Media Studies at Eastern Mediterranean University in North Cyprus. My research focuses on exploring the impact of corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities on sustainable development in Nigeria. CSR involves various initiatives by firms to benefit society, including infrastructure development, education, healthcare, economic empowerment, humanitarian assistance, and philanthropy.

This survey aims to examine public perception of the CSR practices of Mobile Telephone Network of Nigeria (MTNN) and Dangote Cement Plc (DCP) and their contributions to sustainable development in Nigeria. Your participation would greatly help by providing insights that will inform an understanding of these private sector firms' CSR efforts. Please be assured that all responses will remain confidential and used solely for academic purposes. Your honest input will greatly contribute to the advancement of sustainable development in our communities and beyond.

Thank you for your valuable participation.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Ajji Ochanya.

### Section B

Please, tick [  ] the most appropriate option and fill in the blank spaces where necessary.

1. Highest educational qualification

1. Ph.D. 2. M.Sc./M.A 3. B.Sc./B.A/HND 4. OND/NCE 5. School Certificate 6. Others [ ]

2. Gender

Male [ ]

Female [ ]

3. Age

15-24 [ ]

25-34 [ ]

35-44 [ ]

45-54 [ ]

55 Above [ ]

4. State of residence

Benue

Kogi

Plateau

FCT Abuja

Please, specify: .....

5. What is the name of your immediate community?

Please, specify: .....

6. Status in your immediate community of residence

Community Leader [ ]

Youth Leader [ ]

Opinion Leader [ ]

An Academic [ ]

A Media personnel [ ]

Citizen [ ]

Others, please specify: .....

### Section C

Please tick [ ✓ ] the most suitable from the following options. There is no wrong or right option.

strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree.

Strongly disagree [1] Disagree [2] Neutral [3] Agree [4] Strongly agree [5]

S/N		Strongly Disagree [1]	Disagree [2]	Neutral [3]	Agree [4]	Strongly Agree [5]
#	<b>Involvement in Local Communities and Benefits of CSR Projects</b>					
1.	Dangote Cement plc (DCP) invests in CSR and participatory community projects that promote self-reliance.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
2.	Dangote Cement plc's (DCP's) CSR projects have significant and positive impact on my community.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
3.	DCP's CSR initiatives actively engage my community members and also contribute greatly to the development of the community.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

4.	DCP acts for the good and interest of my community.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
5.	DCP actively engage my community members in their CSR initiatives.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
#	<b>Corporate Giving to Worthy Causes</b>					
6.	DCP actively sponsors or finances social events (sports, arts, music...).	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
7.	DCP directs part of its budget to donations and social works.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
8.	DCP makes regularly donations to charity and orphanages.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
9.	DCP supports anti-drug and anti-corruption fight.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
10.	DCP recognizes people for their volunteer work and give them awards.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
#	<b>Philanthropic Dimension of CSR</b>					
11.	DCP regularly donate to charity and contribute to solving other community/societal problems.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
12.	DCP is involved in corporate giving.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
13.	DCP makes regular donations to people in need and help the disadvantaged.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
14.	DCP provides disaster relief.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
#	<b>Sponsorship Activities</b>					
15.	DCP provides educational scholarship for the underprivileged.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
16.	DCP sponsors arts and culture.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
17.	DCP encourages and sponsors talents and invest in the education of young people.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

#	Environmental Concerns					
18.	DCP is concerned and protects natural environment (e.g., forest and water preservation)	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
19.	DCP makes effort to reduce environmental pollution and support environmental sanitation.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
20.	DCP takes care of the immediate environment where their network masts are mounted.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
21.	DCP makes investment to create a better life for future generations Implements programs to minimize its negative impact on the environment.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
22.	DCP does not inform in a correct and truthful way about their support for environmental issues (greenwashing).	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
23.	DCP supports campaigns and projects that promotes environmental sustainability.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
#	Societal Objectives and Sustainable Development					
24.	DCP helps in improving the general well-being of society for the purpose of sustainable development.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
25.	DCP cares and ensures sustainable development by introducing new ideas and innovations.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
26.	DCP contributes significantly to national development through innovations and new technology.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

27.	DCP engages in projects to help develop my community by using their technology to spread development ideas.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
28.	DCP creates jobs for people in my community and region.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
#	<b>Legal Dimensions</b>					
29.	DCP respects the norms defined in the law when carrying out activities.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
30.	DCP ignores and/or sometimes breaks the law.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
#	<b>Ethical Concerns</b>					
31.	DCP is concerned about fulfilling its obligations towards its immediate host and stakeholders.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
32.	DCP sacrifices ethical standards to achieve their corporate objectives.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
33.	DCP cheats on taxes and gives bribes to corrupt officials.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
34.	DCP prioritizes ethical principles over economic performance and profit.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
#	<b>Firm's Motivation</b>					
35.	DCP contributes to economic development and supports good causes in my community.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
36.	DCP supports good causes for the good of the people and for sustainable development.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
37.	DCP maximizes profits at the expense of sustainable development.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
38.	DCP supports good causes to promote the firm.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
#	<b>Firm's Reputation and Transparency</b>					
39.	DCP is a good corporate citizen.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

40.	DCP is a reliable and responsible company.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
41.	DCP behaves ethically/honestly with its customers.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
42.	DCP makes misleading claims to customers through advertising and sale reps.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
#	<b>Inclusivity and Appropriateness</b>					
43.	My community's interests are well represented in DCP.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
44.	DCP makes wide consultation before executing their CSR projects in my community.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
45.	DCP's CSR projects are adequate and meet my community's needs.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
46.	DCP's contribution and support for my community are relevant and valuable.	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

## Appendix B: Ethical Approval



**Eastern Mediternean University**

**Social, Humanities and Administrative Sciences Ethics Subcommittee**

14 October 2024

REF NO ETK00-2024-0181

Dear Ochanya Aji,

I am pleased to inform you that your ethics application for your project titled *A Study of Sustainable Development Practices of Private Sector firms: A Public Relations-based case study of Nigeria* under the supervision of Assist Prof Baruck Opiyo has been approved and you can start data collection.

With all good wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "I. Raman".

Prof Dr Ilhan Raman

Chair, EMU Social Sciences, Humanities and Administration (SOBIB) Ethics Subcommittee