

# Community Engagement Strategies in Public Urban Parks: A Review of Ndubuisi Kanu, Muri Okunola and Freedom Park in Lagos State

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*Abstract- Community engagement in public urban parks plays a critical role in the social, cultural, and environmental well-being of urban populations. This study reviews community engagement strategies employed at three prominent public urban parks in Lagos State, Nigeria - Ndubuisi Kanu Park in Ikeja, Muri Okunola Park in Victoria Island, and Freedom Park on Lagos Island. These parks, managed under the Lagos State Parks and Gardens Agency (LASPARK) and other government authorities, serve as essential green infrastructure within one of Africa's most densely populated megacities. The study adopts a descriptive review methodology, drawing on secondary sources including institutional reports, government publications, academic literature, and media records to investigate the nature, scope, and effectiveness of community engagement practices at each park. Findings reveal that engagement strategies vary significantly across the three parks: Ndubuisi Kanu Park prioritises environmental education, tree planting advocacy, and recreational programmes; Muri Okunola Park leverages cultural events, open-air art exhibitions, and social gatherings to foster community bonds; while Freedom Park employs heritage tourism, cultural performances, and historical interpretation to promote civic identity and public participation. The study concludes that sustainable community engagement in urban parks requires a multi-pronged approach that integrates environmental education, cultural programming, youth participation, public-private partnerships, and inclusive governance. Recommendations are made for stronger policy frameworks and community-centred management models to enhance the social functions of urban parks in Lagos State.*

*Index Terms- Community engagement, Cultural programming, Environmental education, Heritage tourism, Lagos State, LASPARK, , Public green spaces, Urban parks.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Public urban parks are widely recognised as critical components of sustainable cities, offering ecological, recreational, social, and psychological benefits to urban residents (Chiesura, 2004; Bolund & Hunhammar, 1999). Beyond their aesthetic and environmental functions, urban parks serve as vital spaces for community interaction, civic engagement, and cultural expression - especially in rapidly urbanising cities in the Global South. Lagos State, Nigeria, with an estimated population of over 20 million people and a rapidly expanding urban footprint, faces significant challenges in providing adequate green public spaces for its residents (UN-Habitat, 2020).

In Lagos, the Lagos State Parks and Gardens Agency (LASPARK), established under Law No. 13 of 2011, bears the mandate of creating, maintaining, and managing functional parks and gardens across the state (LASPARK, 2023). As of date, the agency manages over 327 parks and gardens statewide, with 212 established by the state government, 85 by private concerns, and 31 in schools. Among these parks, Ndubuisi Kanu Park in Ikeja, Muri Okunola Park in Victoria Island, and Freedom Park on Lagos Island stand out as three of the most prominent public urban parks, each with distinct histories, spatial characters, and community engagement profiles.

Community engagement in the context of urban parks refers to the process of working collaboratively with individuals, groups, and communities to involve them in the planning, management, use, and governance of park spaces (Project for Public Spaces, 2000; Francis

et al., 1984). Effective community engagement transforms parks from passive green areas into dynamic social infrastructure, building social capital, fostering civic identity, and improving public health outcomes (Kuo et al., 1998). Research has consistently demonstrated that parks which actively engage their surrounding communities tend to be better maintained, more inclusive, and more responsive to the needs of diverse populations (Francis, 2002; Arnstein, 1969).

Despite the recognised importance of community engagement in urban park management, there is a limited body of empirical literature that critically examines engagement strategies at specific parks within the Lagos context. Most existing literature on Lagos parks is confined to descriptions of physical facilities and administrative structures, with little attention paid to how these parks actively involve, attract, and sustain community participation. This study therefore seeks to fill this gap by reviewing the community engagement strategies employed at Ndubuisi Kanu Park, Muri Okunola Park, and Freedom Park, drawing on secondary data from government reports, institutional publications, media records, and academic literature.

### 1.1 Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to examine community engagement strategies in selected public urban parks in Lagos State. The specific objectives are as follows:

- i. to identify the types of community engagement strategies employed at Ndubuisi Kanu Park, Muri Okunola Park, and Freedom Park in Lagos State.
- ii. to evaluate the effectiveness of current community engagement practices at the selected parks.
- iii. to identify challenges limiting community participation in urban park governance in Lagos State.
- iv. to recommend strategies for enhancing community engagement in public urban parks in Lagos State.

### 1.2 Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

- i. what community engagement strategies are currently employed at Ndubuisi Kanu Park, Muri Okunola Park, and Freedom Park in Lagos State?
- ii. how effective are these engagement strategies in fostering community participation and social cohesion?
- iii. what are the key challenges limiting community engagement at urban parks in Lagos State?
- iv. what strategies can be used to enhance community engagement in public urban parks in Lagos State.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 2.1 Conceptual Framework

#### Community Engagement in Urban Parks

Community engagement, as a concept, has evolved significantly in urban planning discourse over the past five decades. Arnstein's (1969) seminal "Ladder of Citizen Participation" introduced a typology of eight levels of public participation — from manipulation and tokenism to citizen control — and established that meaningful engagement requires communities to have real power in decision-making processes. Applied to urban park management, this framework suggests that parks which invite residents merely to attend events without involving them in governance represent lower rungs of engagement, while those that enable residents to co-design, co-manage, and co-govern spaces represent higher-order participation.

Project for Public Spaces (2000) and Francis et al. (1984) further elaborated that community open spaces — including parks, plazas, and public gardens — are most socially valuable when they actively involve their surrounding communities in programming, maintenance, and governance. Research by Kuo, Sullivan, Coley, and Brunson (1998) demonstrated that inner-city communities with access to well-managed, community-engaged green spaces exhibit stronger social ties, reduced crime rates, and higher levels of civic participation. Similarly, Kaplan, Kaplan, and Ryan (1998) found that parks that reflect community preferences and values generate higher visitor satisfaction and sustained community attachment.

In the African context, Dumbaugh and Rae (2009) and UN-Habitat (2020) note that urban parks in rapidly urbanising sub-Saharan African cities face unique challenges, including inadequate funding, institutional fragmentation, competing land uses, and limited community awareness. These challenges make deliberate community engagement strategies all the more critical for ensuring that public parks fulfil their social mandate. The Lagos context, with its dense population, socio-economic diversity, and governance complexities, presents a particularly interesting case study for examining how urban parks engage their communities.

## 2.2 Theoretical Framework Social Capital Theory

This study is anchored on Social Capital Theory, particularly as articulated by Putnam (2000), who defined social capital as the networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Urban parks are recognised as important generators of social capital, providing neutral, accessible spaces where people of diverse backgrounds interact, build relationships, and develop shared civic identities (Leyden, 2003). Putnam (2000) further distinguished between "bonding" social capital — ties within homogenous groups — and "bridging" social capital — ties that cross social boundary. Well-managed urban parks with inclusive programming can foster both types, strengthening community cohesion.

Applied to the three parks under review, Social Capital Theory provides a lens for assessing how community engagement strategies — from cultural festivals to environmental education campaigns — contribute to the building of social networks, the reinforcement of civic norms, and the cultivation of trust between park management and local communities. Parks that successfully build social capital become more than recreational spaces; they become institutions of community identity and civic life.

## 2.3 Empirical Review

Garvin and Berens (1997) examined the role of urban parks in community building across American cities and found that parks with active programming and

diverse community outreach generated significantly higher levels of community attachment and civic participation. Hester (1999) similarly argued that community design processes that actively involve residents in shaping park spaces produce outcomes that better reflect community values and needs.

In the Nigerian context, Adedeji and Fadamiro (2013) reviewed the state of urban parks in Akure, Ondo State, and found that inadequate community engagement and poor governance structures had led to the deterioration of public green spaces. They recommended institutionalised community participation mechanisms as essential for sustainable park management. Ogu (2002) and Abiodun (1997) also noted that public spaces in Nigerian cities tend to suffer from low community ownership partly because residents are rarely consulted or involved in their planning and management.

More recently, Olalekan and Adeyemi (2020) examined green space utilisation in Lagos and found that residents' awareness of and participation in park programmes was positively correlated with proximity, accessibility, and the diversity of activities offered. Parks that hosted regular events, offered diverse programming, and maintained visible community partnerships attracted higher visitor numbers and more sustained community engagement. These findings underscore the importance of deliberate and diversified engagement strategies in urban park management.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a descriptive review methodology, which involves a systematic review and synthesis of existing secondary literature, institutional reports, government publications, and media sources related to the three selected parks. The descriptive review approach was selected because the study aims to map, describe, and critically analyse existing community engagement practices rather than generate new primary data. This approach aligns with similar studies in urban planning and park management literature (Adedeji & Fadamiro, 2013; Francis, 2002).

Data sources for this study include: official reports and publications of the Lagos State Parks and Gardens Agency (LASPARK); the official website of Freedom Park Lagos; news media reports from outlets including The Cable, Business Day, Guardian Nigeria, and Ikeja Record; academic journal articles retrieved from Google Scholar and ResearchGate; and community review platforms and visitor documentation. Content analysis was applied to identify recurring themes and patterns in community engagement strategies across the three parks.

The three parks — Ndubuisi Kanu Park, Muri Okunola Park, and Freedom Park — were purposively selected based on their prominence within the Lagos park system, their geographic diversity across different local government areas, and the availability of documented engagement activities. Together, they represent a cross-section of Lagos's urban park landscape, serving different socio-economic populations and employing different management approaches.

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

##### 4.1 Overview of Selected Parks Ndubuisi Kanu Park, Ikeja

Ndubuisi Kanu Park is a public recreational park located at Mobolaji Johnson Avenue, Alausa, Ikeja, Lagos. The park was commissioned on June 12, 2014, by then Lagos State Governor Babatunde Raji Fashola (SAN) to mark the 21st anniversary of the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential elections. It was named after Rear Admiral (Rtd.) Ndubuisi Godwin Kanu, a former Military Administrator of Lagos State from 1977 to 1978, who also served as a pro-democracy activist (TheCable, 2024; LASPARK, 2023).

The park is managed by LASPARK and features a lawn tennis court, basketball court, children's play area, seats and benches, patios, sheds, and a snacks stand, set within a large green area suitable for picnics and leisure (Wikipedia, 2026; LASPARK, 2023). The park has undergone a period of decline and subsequent extensive renovation, with LASPARK announcing plans for its reopening in 2025 following the completion of renovation works.

The entry fee upon reopening was set at ₦1,000, a charge LASPARK defended as supporting maintenance, cleaning, and security (TikTok/Ikeja Record, 2025).

##### Muri Okunola Park, Victoria Island

Muri Okunola Park is located on Adeyemo Alakija Street, Victoria Island, Lagos. Formerly known as Cloverleaf Park, it was commissioned on December 18, 2008, by Governor Babatunde Raji Fashola (SAN) in honour of the late Justice Muri Okunola, a distinguished jurist who served Lagos State and Nigeria (LASPARK, 2023; LagosDiaspora, 2022). The park is managed by LASPARK and is situated adjacent to the Lagos campus of the Nigerian Law School, making it easily accessible to a professional and cosmopolitan demographic.

Spanning several acres, the park features lush gardens, well-manicured lawns, exotic flowers, and beautifully landscaped spaces, with a seating capacity of approximately 3,000 (ViewLagos, 2024). Its strategic location in the heart of Victoria Island, one of Lagos's premier commercial and residential districts, positions it as a key social and cultural hub. The park charges an entry fee of ₦1,000 and offers its spaces for event rentals including weddings, festivals, brand activations, and film and video productions (FlightPadi, 2025).

##### Freedom Park, Lagos Island

Freedom Park occupies a historically significant site on Broad Street, Lagos Island — formerly the site of Her Majesty's Broad Street Prison, one of the oldest colonial correctional facilities in Nigeria. The prison was established in 1882 following Britain's annexation of Lagos in 1861, originally constructed with mud walls and grass thatch before being rebuilt with English bricks in 1885. The prison held several of Nigeria's most prominent independence activists, including Sir Herbert Macaulay, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Chief Lateef Jakande, and Michael Imoudu (Wikipedia, 2026; Ikeja Record, 2024).

The transformation of the prison site into Freedom Park was conceived by Nigerian architect Theo Lawson in 1999 under the aegis of the Creative Intelligence Agency (now Cultural Intellectual Association — CIA-Lagos). The project was

actualised under Governor Babatunde Fashola's administration and the park was officially opened in October 2010 to commemorate Nigeria's 50th independence anniversary (Wikipedia, 2026; Freedom Park Lagos, 2024). Lawson's design philosophy was to preserve history symbolically while creating a vibrant contemporary public space — turning gallows into a performance stage and prison cells into market stalls and kiosks (BusinessDay, 2026).

#### 4.2 Community Engagement Strategies at the Selected Parks

##### 4.2.1 Ndubuisi Kanu Park: Environmental Education and Recreational Engagement

Community engagement at Ndubuisi Kanu Park has been primarily driven by environmental education and advocacy initiatives, recreational programming, and government-led ceremonial activities. LASPARK has consistently used the park as a platform for its environmental stewardship campaigns, most notably the annual Tree Planting Day initiative. On September 24, 2025, top government officials including the Special Adviser to the Governor on Environment, Engr. Olakunle Rotimi-Akodu, conducted a symbolic tree planting exercise at the park as part of the 2025 tree planting advocacy campaign themed "Trees for Lagos" (LASPARK, 2025).

LASPARK has also partnered with the Lagos State Environmental Protection Agency (LASEPA) to host an Eco Explorers Bootcamp at the park, bringing together 100 children during the summer holiday period for environmental education activities including painting, gardening, and learning about recycling (LASPARK, 2023). This initiative represents a youth-oriented engagement strategy that seeks to instil eco-conscious values in the next generation of Lagosians. These programmes align with LASPARK's stated mandate of cultivating community champions who will ensure the protection of the natural environment in the future (LASPARK, 2023).

Beyond environmental programming, the park serves as a recreational and social gathering space for Ikeja

residents, offering facilities for tennis, basketball, children's play, and picnicking (Wikipedia, 2026). However, the park experienced a significant decline over a decade following its 2014 commissioning, with reports indicating severe deterioration of facilities and loss of greenery (TheCable, 2024). This decline raises important questions about the sustainability of community engagement strategies when physical park infrastructure is not consistently maintained. The ongoing renovation and planned reopening in 2025 represent a renewed commitment to restoring the park's community engagement functions.

##### 4.2.2 Muri Okunola Park: Cultural Programming and Social Events

Muri Okunola Park has developed one of the most diverse and sustained community engagement profiles among Lagos's public urban parks, primarily through cultural programming, social events, and open-air artistic exhibitions. The park hosts a wide range of activities throughout the year, including yoga classes, fitness sessions, cultural festivities, concerts, corporate events, and destination weddings (Evendo, 2025; LagosDiaspora, 2022). Its accommodating capacity of over 2,000 persons and versatile open spaces make it an ideal venue for large community gatherings.

A particularly noteworthy engagement initiative at Muri Okunola Park was the introduction of an open-air art gallery in November 2017, facilitated by LASPARK under the then General Manager Mrs. Bilikiss Adebisi-Abiola. The gallery was open to artists across Lagos every Saturday and Sunday, providing a platform for local artists to display and sell their works to park visitors (LASPARK, 2017). The initiative was premised on the understanding that engagement with art in park environments positively impacts public health and well-being by reducing anxiety and depression, while fostering community socialisation (LASPARK, 2017). This type of cultural-environmental integration represents a sophisticated approach to community engagement that goes beyond conventional recreational programming.

Corporate social responsibility events have also been a significant feature of community engagement at

Muri Okunola Park. In 2025, AXA Mansard Insurance Plc hosted a Family Week event at the park aimed at fostering unity, promoting diversity, and strengthening family bonds among staff, clients, and partners (Guardian Nigeria, 2025). The park has also become an important venue for civil society-driven advocacy, including events supporting child rights and gender-based violence prevention in partnership with the Lagos State Domestic and Sexual Violence Agency (Guardian Nigeria, 2025). These activities demonstrate the park's role as a platform for multi-stakeholder community engagement.

#### 4.2.3 Freedom Park: Heritage Tourism and Civic Identity

Freedom Park employs the most distinctive and historically grounded community engagement approach of the three parks, centred on heritage tourism, cultural performances, and civic identity formation. The park's transformation from a colonial prison into a public cultural space is itself a powerful act of community engagement — reclaiming a site of historical oppression and repurposing it as a space of freedom, creativity, and commemoration (BusinessDay, 2026; Wikipedia, 2026).

Heritage tourism is central to Freedom Park's engagement strategy. Guided tours led by knowledgeable park guides expose visitors to Nigeria's colonial history, including the stories of freedom fighters imprisoned at Broad Street Prison (Freedom Park Lagos, 2024; Ikeja Record, 2024). The park's architect, Theo Lawson, noted that the design deliberately embeds historical traces — the spatial logic of the original prison, prison cell dimensions, gallows repurposed as performance stages — within a contemporary leisure environment, creating what he described as a space where "leisure and remembrance coexist without competing" (BusinessDay, 2026).

Live cultural performances constitute another major pillar of Freedom Park's community engagement strategy. The park's open-air amphitheatre regularly hosts live music nights, theatre productions, spoken word events, and literary festivals (MindTrip, 2025; Humbo, 2024). Music genres including highlife, jazz, and Afrobeats are showcased, attracting diverse

audiences and fostering intergenerational and intercultural exchange. These performances serve not only as entertainment but as vehicles for cultural preservation and civic storytelling, using the park's historical context as a backdrop for contemporary artistic expression.

The Wole Soyinka Gallery within Freedom Park — named after Nigeria's Nobel Laureate — provides a dedicated exhibition space for visual art, housing diverse collections that range from classical African sculptures to contemporary multimedia installations (Humbo, 2024). This integration of gallery space within a public park represents a deliberate effort to democratise access to art and cultural heritage, making these resources available to all park visitors rather than confining them to formal museum settings. The park's food court and market kiosks — developed from former prison kitchen and cell spaces — further anchor the community to the site by providing economic activity and culinary heritage experiences.

#### 4.3 Comparative Analysis of Engagement Strategies

Table 1: Comparative Summary of Community Engagement Strategies at Selected Parks

Dimension	Ndubuisi Kanu Park	Muri Okunola Park	Freedom Park
Location	Ikeja, Lagos	Victoria Island, Lagos	Lagos Island, Lagos
Year Established	2014	2008	2010
Managing Authority	LASPARK	LASPARK	Freedom Park Lagos / State Govt.
Primary Engagement Type	Environmental education & recreation	Cultural events & social programming	Heritage tourism & civic programming
Youth Programmes	Eco Explorers Bootcamp, tree planting	Fitness classes, community events	Guided historical tours, youth narratives
Cultural Activities	Tree planting ceremonies	Open-air art gallery, concerts,	Live music, theatre, gallery,

	festivals	spoken word	
Corporate Engagement	Public-private CSR events, tree planting	Private brand activations	events, tourism partnerships
Entry Fee	₦1,000	₦1,000	₦500 (general), ₦1,500 (tour)
Key Challenge	Physical decline & maintenance gaps	Balancing exclusivity and public access	Funding sustainability & government dependency

The comparative analysis in Table 1 reveals that while all three parks employ community engagement strategies, the depth, diversity, and sophistication of these strategies vary considerably. Freedom Park demonstrates the most deliberate and historically grounded engagement approach, leveraging its unique colonial heritage to attract diverse visitor groups and foster civic identity. Muri Okunola Park demonstrates the strongest corporate and cultural engagement profile, benefiting from its prime Victoria Island location and its established reputation as an events venue. Ndubuisi Kanu Park, despite its strong government-backed environmental education initiatives, faces significant challenges arising from physical infrastructure decline that have undermined its community engagement potential.

#### 4.4 Challenges Limiting Community Engagement

Several challenges limit the effectiveness of community engagement strategies at the three parks. Infrastructure deterioration is a primary concern, particularly at Ndubuisi Kanu Park, which experienced a severe decline in physical facilities over the decade following its 2014 commissioning (TheCable, 2024). Deteriorated parks signal neglect, discouraging community visitation and participation. The park's ongoing renovation demonstrates governmental acknowledgement of this challenge,

though sustainability of maintenance remains uncertain.

Accessibility and affordability barriers also limit community engagement. Entry fees of ₦1,000 at Ndubuisi Kanu and Muri Okunola Parks, and ₦500–₦1,500 at Freedom Park, may constitute significant financial barriers for low-income Lagosians, particularly given Lagos's high cost of living and widespread poverty. This pricing structure risks excluding the very communities that could benefit most from access to public green spaces, contradicting the principle of inclusive urban parks (UN-Habitat, 2020).

Governance and funding challenges also constrain engagement. LASPARK manages over 327 parks across Lagos with limited financial resources, making it difficult to sustain diverse programming at all parks simultaneously. Freedom Park faces particular vulnerability to government funding dependencies and restrictive institutional agreements that have limited its operational flexibility (BusinessDay, 2026). Without stable, diversified funding — combining government allocation, private sector partnerships, and community contributions — sustained community engagement programming remains difficult.

Low community awareness and limited civic culture around park use further constrain engagement. Research indicates that many Lagos residents are unaware of available park programmes and activities, while others perceive urban parks as unsafe or low-priority destinations (Olalekan & Adeyemi, 2020). Building a culture of park use and community ownership requires sustained public education and outreach beyond park boundaries.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study has reviewed community engagement strategies at three prominent public urban parks in Lagos State — Ndubuisi Kanu Park, Muri Okunola Park, and Freedom Park — using a descriptive review methodology. Findings reveal that these parks employ distinct but complementary engagement approaches: environmental education and advocacy at Ndubuisi Kanu Park; cultural programming and

social events at Muri Okunola Park; and heritage tourism and civic identity formation at Freedom Park. Each park contributes meaningfully to Lagos's social infrastructure, though significant challenges in infrastructure maintenance, accessibility, governance, and funding sustainability limit the full realisation of their community engagement potential.

The study concludes that sustainable community engagement in urban parks in Lagos State requires a multi-pronged approach integrating: (i) consistent investment in physical park infrastructure as the foundation for community use; (ii) diverse and inclusive programming that caters to varied demographic groups; (iii) meaningful youth participation and environmental education; (iv) robust public-private partnerships to diversify revenue streams; and (v) community-centred governance models that give residents a genuine voice in park management and decision-making.

#### 5.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- i. LASPARK and park management authorities should establish formal Community Advisory Boards at each major park, comprising diverse representatives from surrounding communities, civil society, academia, and the private sector to guide park programming and governance.
- ii. The Lagos State Government should review the pricing structure of public parks with a view to introducing tiered entry fees or free days to ensure accessibility for low-income residents, particularly at parks like Ndubuisi Kanu Park that primarily serve residential communities.
- iii. Park management authorities should develop and implement structured youth engagement programmes at all parks, including educational field trips, youth volunteer schemes, environmental clubs, and junior park ambassador initiatives.
- iv. A dedicated funding framework combining government appropriations, corporate sponsorships, entrance fee revenue, and philanthropic support should be established to ensure sustainable park programming and infrastructure maintenance.

- v. Academic institutions, including Caleb University and other Lagos-based universities, should forge research and community service partnerships with park management authorities to contribute intellectual resources and student engagement to park programming.

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