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MBOM-UZO - A HARNESSABLE INDIGENOUS SOCIO-RELIGIOUS TOOL FOR ADVANCING SDG 6 AMONG THE IGBO OF EASTERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, provide a global framework for promoting peace, prosperity, and sustainable development SDG 6, focusing on clean water and sanitation, is vital for public health, environmental sustainability, and socio-economic development. Despite international attention, progress remains slow, often due to top-down approaches that overlook local contexts, culturally embedded practices, and indigenous knowledge systems essential for sustainable interventions. Community-driven, culturally rooted methods can enhance relevance, acceptance, and long-term impact, particularly in cohesive rural communities. This study examines SDG 6 through the Mbom-Uzo festival, a traditional Igbo socio-religious practice in eastern Nigeria. Focusing on communities in Imo State, the festival involves rituals, communal participation, and norms that sanctify water sources and promote collective responsibility. Ethnographic methods, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews, provided insights into social dynamics, traditional governance, and water-related customs. Thematic analysis identified patterns linking cultural practices and communal interactions to water management. Using Durkheim's functional theory of religion, the study shows how Mbom-Uzo fosters cohesion, shared values, and collective action, strengthening social bonds and supporting community-based water governance. It concludes that Mbom-Uzo offers a culturally grounded, participatory pathway to enhance clean water and sanitation, demonstrating the importance of embedding development initiatives within local social, cultural, and spiritual contexts to achieve sustainable outcomes.

Keywords: Harnessable, Indigenous, SDG 6, Igbo, Socio-Religious and Eastern Nigeria

Introduction

The **Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 6),** adopted by the United Nations in 2015, comprise seventeen global objectives aimed at promoting peace, prosperity, and sustainable development by 2030. Building on the earlier Millennium Development Goals, the SDG 6 encompasses economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development (United Nations). Scholars have examined the SDG 6 from multiple perspectives. Socially, citizen participations and transformative social innovation are critical for successful implementation, highlighting community engagement rather than rigid outcomes (Smith 45; Jones 102). Politically, the rise of populist movements, particularly right-wing trends in Europe, can

hinder progress by shaping policy decisions (Müller 78). Economically, normative frameworks support equitable resource allocation toward goals such as health in Sub-Saharan Africa, while social accounting practices improve transparency and ensure alignment of budgets with the SDG 6 (Adams and Kumi 33).

Despite widespread recognition of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 6), progress remains slow, often due to reliance on standardised United Nations frameworks that emphasise uniform policies and global indicators, particularly for SDG 6, which addresses clean water and sanitation (United Nations). Such top-down approaches risk neglecting local contexts and culturally embedded practices. Integrating community-driven, culturally rooted methods such as indigenous Nigerian practices can enhance the relevance, acceptance, and sustainability of SDG interventions, fostering more effective development outcomes (Okeke 56; Nnewi 72).

This critical dimension has often been overlooked in SDG scholarship, creating a notable gap. While much research addresses SDG 6 broadly, this study focuses specifically on SDG 6 through the lens of the **Mbom-Uzo festival**, examining its practices, cultural significance, and potential to advance water and sanitation goals among the Igbo of eastern Nigeria (Sam 199; Sloane 2025). By exploring both the obstacles Mbom-Uzo encounters and practical solutions, this work demonstrates how indigenous methods can harness deep local knowledge, established social networks, and traditional governance structures to foster authentic community ownership. This rooted approach not only increases relevance and acceptance but also strengthens the durability and impact of water and sanitation initiatives, reinforcing efforts to achieve SDG 6 on the ground.

Scope of the Study

The research focuses on the Igbo communities of Umuagwo, Uboma, Nguru, Ohuhu, Eziama, Amakhoia, and Umuezegwu, located within Ihitte/Uboma, Obowo, and Ehime Mbano Local Government Areas of Imo State, Nigeria. It investigates the cultural practices surrounding the Mbom-Uzo festival and their implications for SDG 6. The study emphasises how indigenous knowledge, including traditional governance and social networks, supports sustainable water management, instils community responsibility, and promotes long-term water and sanitation solutions. Integrating Mbom-Uzo water-related rituals and communal norms into contemporary SDG strategies provides a culturally grounded pathway to achieving SDG 6, offering resilience against the limitations of standardised, top-down frameworks (Okeke 59; Nnewi 75).

Methodology

This study employed participant observation and semi-structured interviews as its primary research methods during field visits to the communities of Umuezegwu and Amakhoia in Imo State, Nigeria. The visits coincided with the Mbom-Uzo festival, providing immersive exposure to its rituals and communal activities. The researcher actively engaged in festival practices, allowing for both observational and experiential data collection. This ethnographic approach offered nuanced insights into social dynamics, traditional governance, and water-related customs embedded in the festival, highlighting implications for sustainable water

management and SDG 6 implementation. Familial ties through marriage further enhanced access to insider perspectives, strengthening the interpretive validity of the findings.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the collected qualitative data. Data from participant observations and interviews were systematically coded to identify recurring patterns, themes, and categories relating to cultural practices, social interactions, and water management customs. These findings were then contextualised within broader theoretical frameworks and SDG 6 objectives, demonstrating how indigenous knowledge and community engagement contribute to sustainable water governance. This integrated methodology facilitated a comprehensive understanding of Mbom-Uzo cultural significance and its potential to advance localised development goals.

Theoretical Framework

Émile Durkheim's functional theory of religion provides the theoretical lens for this study. Durkheim conceptualises religion and, by extension, festivals as essential social institutions that foster cohesion and solidarity within communities (Durkheim 42). According to Durkheim, religious rituals generate collective effervescence, reinforcing social bonds and shared values that maintain societal order. Within this framework, the Mbom-Uzo festival is not merely a cultural event but a critical mechanism for strengthening the social fabric of the Igbo people. It promotes collective action and cooperation necessary for managing communal resources, such as water. By emphasising the festival's religious and ritual dimensions, this study demonstrates how Mbom-Uzo sustains community identity and responsibility, supporting the achievement of SDG 6 objectives on clean water and sanitation. The functionalist perspective thus provides a robust sociological foundation for understanding how indigenous festivals contribute to development goals by embedding them within communal moral and social structures.

Understanding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 6)

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 6), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, form a universal framework of 17 goals, 169 targets, and associated indicators designed to achieve a sustainable and equitable future by 2030 (United Nations). These goals address urgent global challenges, including poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, climate change, peace, and justice. SDG 6 Clean Water and Sanitation is particularly relevant to this study, as it seeks to ensure universal access to safe water and adequate sanitation. The SDG 6 collectively spans social, economic, and environmental dimensions of development, providing a comprehensive blueprint for global progress. Among these goals are:

- Goal 1: No Poverty
- Goal 2: Zero Hunger
- Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being
- Goal 4: Quality Education
- Goal 5: Gender Equality
- Goals: Clean Water and Sanitation

- Goal 7: Affordable and Clean Energy
- Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth
- Goal 13: Climate Action

By integrating the SDG 6 with indigenous practices such as Mbom-Uzo, this study situates local cultural knowledge within global development frameworks and highlights culturally grounded pathways to achieving SDG 6.

Focus on SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

For this study, the primary focus is on **Goals: Clean Water and Sanitation,** reflecting its critical importance in promoting health, livelihoods, and sustainable development. This goal addresses the fundamental human need for safe and accessible water, which underpins public health, economic growth, and social well-being. The study examines the rationale for prioritising clean water and sanitation, evaluates strategies employed at local, national, and global levels, and critically considers the challenges and limitations that have impeded its full achievement, including issues related to infrastructure, governance, funding, and community engagement (United Nations).

Goals seeks to ensure universal access to safe and affordable water and adequate sanitation, eliminate open defecation, improve water quality, and promote sustainable water management through integrated approaches (United Nations). The goal also emphasises protecting water-related ecosystems, international cooperation, and active community engagement in water and sanitation governance. Clean water is vital not only for drinking and hygiene but also for food production and industrial use, while adequate sanitation prevents disease, protects ecosystems, and safeguards human dignity.

This goal is particularly relevant to **Nigeria** and the Igbo communities of Eastern Nigeria, where access to clean water and sanitation remains a pressing developmental challenge. According to UNICEF and WHO, approximately 70 million Nigerians lack access to safe drinking water, and over 110 million lack adequate sanitation services (UNICEF and WHO 12). This deficit contributes to high rates of waterborne diseases, including cholera, typhoid, and diarrhoea, which are significant causes of child mortality. SDG 6 seeks to address these challenges through targeted interventions: universal and equitable access to safe water (Targets.1), adequate sanitation (Targets.2), and improved water quality and sustainable resource management (Targetss.3–6.6). By focusing on culturally embedded, community-driven approaches such as the Mbom-Uzo festival this study highlights pathways to achieving these targets in a locally relevant and sustainable manner.

Significance of SDG 6 for the Igbo‟s Public Health and Development in the context of Ubomuzor

Achieving the targets of SDG 6 is critical for promoting public health, reducing poverty, and fostering economic growth. Limited access to clean water compels millions particularly women and children to spend significant hours fetching water, which diminishes educational and economic opportunities and perpetuates gender inequality (United Nations). By ensuring safe water and adequate sanitation, SDG 6 advances productivity, gender equity, and social justice.

During field visits to Imo State in September 2025, which coincided with the Ubomuzor Festival, it became evident that SDG 6 holds particular significance for the Igbo people due to the region's unique environmental challenges. In Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Abia, and Ebonyi States, many communities rely on boreholes, rainwater, and streams, which are often contaminated by erosion and waste. Sanitation challenges and open defecation remain prevalent in rural areas, highlighting the importance of Targetss.2 ands.3 (UNICEF and WHO 14). Additionally, severe gully erosion threatens water sources and farmlands, making Targets.6 focused on protecting water-related ecosystems particularly vital.

The Mbom-Uzo Phenomenon

The **Mbom-Uzo festival,** also known as Ubomuzor, is a deeply rooted annual ceremonial practice among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria, primarily celebrated in communities within Ihitte/Uboma and parts of Obowo and Ehime Mbano Local Government Areas in Imo State (Okeke 56; Sam 199). The Igbo are a historically rich and complex ethnic group with origins tracing back to ancient settlements around 900 BCE. Their social and political organisation is notably decentralised, with autonomous communities linked through kinship, age grades, and title-taking institutions that sustain communal governance and social cohesion. Central to Igbo identity is the **Nri Kingdom**, established circa the 10th century CE, recognised as Nigeria's oldest monarchy and profoundly influential in shaping Igbo cosmology, religious practices, and customary law (Onwuejiogwu 81).

During the 19th-century British colonial incursion, traditional governance structures were disrupted, leading to shifts toward Christian beliefs and Western education, which catalysed socio-political transformation. Economically, the Igbo have traditionally engaged in agriculture, craftsmanship, and vibrant market trade, establishing themselves as prominent entrepreneurs within Nigeria and the diaspora. This economic dynamism is complemented by strong educational values, resulting in high literacy rates and significant intellectual contributions at the national level (Afigbo 45).

The Mbom-Uzo festival, therefore, is not merely cultural but also serves as a framework for reinforcing communal identity, governance, and resource management, particularly in water and sanitation, thereby demonstrating its relevance to SDG 6. Despite the devastations of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), the Igbo people have demonstrated remarkable resilience, maintaining cultural cohesion through festivals, language, and indigenous religious practices. Scholars emphasise the Igbo strategy of harmonising traditional customs with modern development paradigms to sustain socio-political relevance and economic vitality in contemporary Nigeria (Onwuejiogwu 81; Afigbo 45).

The Mbom-Uzo festival exemplifies the Igbo holistic cosmology, in which physical and spiritual realms coexist, emphasising communal cooperation to address tangible and metaphysical challenges. Linguistically, ―Uzo‖ denotes a ―path,‖ while ―Mbom‖ means ―to clear,‖ rendering Mbom-Uzo the communal act of clearing pathways. The festival originated among the Obowo people as a traditional practice to clear pathways to farmlands, shrines, streams, and marketplaces, symbolising the community's physical and spiritual lifelines (Okeke 57). It arose following periods of misfortune marked by poor harvests and social discord, during which diviners revealed spiritual impurities obstructing the land, necessitating purification to restore balance and prosperity.

Mbom-Uzo involves prayers, offerings of kola nuts, palm wine, and native fowl to ancestors and deities, rhythmic music and drumming, dances, and masquerade performances. These activities foster unity, moral discipline, and communal cohesion while adapting to contemporary influences, including Christianity (Sam 199). The festival is celebrated annually between September and December, corresponding with the seventh month of the traditional Igbo agricultural calendar and the conclusion of the yam harvest, which typically begins in March or April. This timing signifies renewal, preparation, and gratitude for the harvest. The ritual cleansing of physical paths symbolises the removal of spiritual obstacles to both community and individual progress, encompassing prayers, libations, chanting, dancing, and sacrifices intended to realign the community's **chi** the personal spiritual force linking individual destiny with universal life (Sloane 2025).

Culturally, Mbom-Uzo is rich in symbolism. Clearing paths is both literal ensuring access to farms, markets, and sacred sites and metaphorical, representing the removal of spiritual and physical hindrances. The festival coincides with the New Year's Festival, where new yams symbols of life and fertility are offered in thanksgiving to gods and ancestors. Vibrant dances, music including the Ikoro drum, and communal feasting, such as sharing Ugba na Mkpurusu (sliced oil bean fruit with pounded melon seeds wrapped in banana leaves), reinforce cultural identity, social solidarity, and communal empowerment.

Socially, Mbom-Uzo embodies participatory governance. Community elders uphold tradition and cultural protocols, while spiritual leaders determine ritual timing through ancestral guidance. Age grades and ordinary members organise and execute the path-clearing work, with enforcement mechanisms such as fines to encourage participation. The festival fosters social discipline, cohesion, and mutual accountability. Also, it functions as a venue for conflict resolution and political discourse, demonstrating its significance beyond spiritual practice to broader social governance (Okeke 59).

Environmentally and socially, the **Mbom-Uzo festival** involves collective physical labour in clearing paths, roads, and public spaces, thereby improving community infrastructure and promoting environmental management (Nnewicity 2025; Ezesoukwu 2025). This practice revitalises communal solidarity, strengthens social cohesion, and supports indigenous governance structures, while ensuring continuity in environmental stewardship. By integrating spiritual cleansing, cultural preservation, and social governance, the festival exemplifies the dynamic interdependence of land, cosmos, and community within Igbo society, reaffirming cultural resilience amid modern transformations.

In sum, Ubomuzor or Mbom-Uzo represents a holistic, multifaceted festival that integrates spiritual beliefs, communal governance, cultural symbolism, and environmental concerns. The festival enacts spiritual purification, fosters social cohesion, celebrates communal identity, and reinforces resilience by promoting collective responsibility and cosmic harmony. It serves as a living, evolving mechanism for social governance, spiritual realignment, cultural affirmation, environmental management, and communal resilience among the Igbo (Nnewicity 2025; Ezesoukwu 2025).

Relevance to SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

In specific communities across **Imo State,** such as Ihitte/Uboma, Obowo, and Ehime Mbano Local Government Areas, Mbom-Uzo and Ubomuzor hold profound significance for environmental stewardship and water resource management, aligning directly with **Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 6),** which prioritises universal access to clean water and sanitation (United Nations), (Ayantayo,117), (Ayantayo , 148)

In Ihitte/Uboma, the Mbom-Uzo festival focuses on sanitation and environmental care. Community members collectively clear roads, paths, and public spaces to remove debris and overgrown vegetation, improving natural drainage and reducing breeding grounds for pests. These activities, conducted after the harvest, prepare the land physically and spiritually for the new agricultural season while symbolically dispelling harmful forces that obstruct communal well-being. These actions directly support SDG targetss.1 and b, which emphasise improved sanitation and community participation. Ancestral guardianship over land and water bodies is invoked, embedding respect for sustainable resource use within cultural values (Ezesoukwu 2025).

Similarly, in Obowo, Mbom-Uzo integrates communal labour with spiritual purification. Villagers cleanse physical and spiritual spaces, promoting water conservation and ecosystem health. Ancestors and earth deities are invoked to bless the agricultural season, reinforcing environmental ethics and communal responsibility for water resources (Nnewicity 2025).

Regarding **Ubomuzor**, ethnographic insights suggest that this ritual emphasises the spiritual cleansing of water bodies and protective prayers for sustainable water use, reflecting a cosmology that sanctifies water. Such practices reinforce taboos against pollution, consistent with SDG targets.6, which seeks to protect water-related ecosystems. The ritual‘s spiritual framework provides a culturally grounded approach to ecosystem restoration and water conservation ethics.

Communal governance is strengthened through **age-grade systems**, where elders and spiritual leaders act as custodians, mediating between indigenous knowledge and formal water management structures. This collaboration enables empowered local stakeholder engagement, supporting SDG 6‘s objective of inclusive community participation in water and sanitation governance (Ezesoukwu 2025).

Ethnographic interviews with local leaders, such as **Eze of Umunezegwu**, indicate that Mbom-Uzo practices have contributed to reducing waterborne diseases. Collective sanitation activities reduce stagnant water that harbours disease vectors, including mosquitoes, thereby reducing the incidence of cholera, typhoid, and malaria. Coordinated post-harvest sanitation efforts also minimise soil erosion and water contamination, preserving water quality. Spiritually reinforced taboos against polluting streams and rivers encourage hygienic behaviours vital for disease prevention.

Judging from the evidence presented, it is arguable that the **Mbom-Uzo and Ubomuzor ceremonies** in Ihitte/Uboma, Obowo, and Ehime Mbano embody an integrated physical and spiritual approach to water and sanitation management. These festivals complement modern environmental and health initiatives by embedding sustainable practices within indigenous

cultural frameworks, enabling community-driven pathways toward achieving **SDG 6"s objectives** of universal access to clean and safe water and adequate sanitation (Nnewicity 2025; Ezesoukwu 2025). By aligning spiritual, communal, and environmental actions, these rituals foster culturally grounded stewardship, collective responsibility, and enhanced resilience in local water management systems.

Challenges to Leveraging Ubomuzor for SDG 6

Despite its potential, several sociocultural, informational, infrastructural, and governance challenges constrain the effective utilisation of Ubomuzor in achieving SDG 6 outcomes in Igbo communities, such as Amakhoia in Imo State. Addressing these barriers is crucial for integrating traditional knowledge with contemporary water and sanitation initiatives.

1. Limited Awareness of SDG 6

A significant challenge is the lack of awareness and understanding of SDG 6 among rural Igbo communities. Research indicates that over 86% of residents, including those in villages such as Amakhoia, remain unaware of the SDG 6, mainly due to insufficient dissemination of information in Igbo, the primary local language (UNICEF and WHO 2023). This linguistic gap limits the community‘s ability to recognise the synergy between traditional rituals like Ubomuzor and modern water and sanitation targets.

2. Infrastructural Deficiencies

Inadequate water supply and sanitation infrastructure also undermine the practical translation of Ubomuzor‘s spiritual cleansing into tangible improvements. Many rural communities in Imo State including Amakhoia, Ihitte/Uboma, Obowo, and Ehime Mbano lack essential water and sanitation facilities. Statistics indicate that approximately 50% of rural communities lack adequate water and sanitation, and that 88% of healthcare centres lack proper sanitation services (UNICEF and WHO 2023). Consequently, despite the ritual‘s emphasis on spiritual purification, insufficient physical infrastructure remains a significant obstacle to improving water safety and hygiene.

3. Cultural Constraints

Certain cultural beliefs and traditional practices may inadvertently hinder the adoption of modern sanitation standards. While Ubomuzor promotes environmental respect and spiritual cleansing, some inherited customs, taboos, and secretive rituals restrict open discussions of sanitation and limit the utilisation of alternative water sources. In communities like Amakhoia, resistance to modern sanitation technologies often stems from a preference for indigenous customs, complicating efforts to introduce contemporary hygiene practices (Ezesoukwu 2025). Addressing these cultural barriers is essential to fostering the behavioural changes needed to meet SDG 6 objectives.

4. Socio-Economic and Governance Challenges

Socio-economic factors, such as poverty and low educational attainment, constrain sustainable improvements in water and sanitation. Households in Amakhoia and nearby villages may prioritise immediate survival over investment in sanitation infrastructure, even

when participating symbolically in Ubomuzor rites. Limited educational outreach further means that many community members lack awareness of waterborne diseases and the benefits of proper sanitation, weakening the potential impact of both traditional rituals and modern interventions (Ezesoukwu 2025).

5. Conflicts between indigenous authorities and the formal government

Fifthly, **governance conflicts** between indigenous authorities and formal government bodies limit cohesive water management. Custodians of Ubomuzor primarily elders and spiritual leaders wield significant local authority. However, in communities like Amakhoia, their roles often overlap or conflict with statutory water governance agencies, creating discord that can stall program implementation and dilute policy effectiveness. Such conflicts hinder integrated resource management and impede progress toward SDG 6 objectives (Nnewicity 2025).

Collectively, these factors indicate that while Ubomuzor embodies rich cultural and environmental values aligned with SDG 6, it faces **five significant challenges** in practical application across Igbo communities including Ihitte/Uboma, Obowo, Ehime Mbano, and Amakhoia. These are: (1) low awareness due to language barriers, (2) inadequate infrastructure, (3) cultural conflicts with modern hygiene practices, (4) socio-economic constraints, and (5) governance discrepancies. Addressing these barriers through targeted education, infrastructure investment, culturally sensitive sanitation promotion, and integrated governance frameworks is essential to realising the full potential of Ubomuzor in advancing clean water and sanitation goals (United Nations).

Pathways to Overcoming Challenges

Overcoming barriers to **SDG 6 implementation** among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria requires a strategic, culturally sensitive, multi-pronged approach. This approach must respect local cultural values, empower traditional leaders, invest in infrastructure, enhance education and communication in indigenous languages, and foster collaboration between customary and governmental institutions.

1. Respecting Cultural Values

The importance of respecting cultural values cannot be overstated. Ubomuzor is deeply embedded in Igbo spirituality and social cohesion, providing a foundation for communal action. In villages like Amakohia and Obinze near Owerri, aligning SDG 6 initiatives with Ubomuzor ceremonies has increased community acceptance and participation. For instance, water projects timed with Ubomuzor allow communities to invoke ancestral blessings on new wells or sanitation facilities, effectively blending tradition with modern development. This approach fosters ownership and sustainability, as interventions are seen not as external impositions but as extensions of indigenous practices (Ezesoukwu 2025).

2. Empowering Traditional Leaders

Empowering traditional leaders is also critical. In Umuguma and Irete, where elders and spiritual custodians hold significant authority, they have been engaged as intermediaries to raise awareness of SDG 6 during Ubomuzor ceremonies. Endorsement by these leaders helps

overcome scepticism toward modern water and sanitation agencies and mobilises local labour to construct facilities and conduct cleanliness campaigns. Training traditional leaders in water safety and hygiene equips them to serve as informed cultural advocates, able to mediate effectively between government programs and community interests (Nnewicity 2025).

3. Bridging Ritual and Infrastructure for Sustainable Water Access

To us, improving infrastructure is essential to bridge the gap between ritual symbolism and practical outcomes. Despite the spiritual significance of Ubomuzor, many villages near Owerri continue to face water scarcity and inadequate sanitation facilities. In communities such as Ihiagwa and Naze, initiatives to install boreholes, latrines, and handwashing stations have been combined with Ubomuzor rituals to sanctify and protect these new resources. Integrating physical infrastructure development with cultural ceremonies enhances community commitment to maintenance, reducing the risk of vandalism and neglect that often occurs in purely technocratic projects.

4. Promoting Hygiene through Education and Indigenous Communication

There is an urgent need to enhance education and communication in Igbo to facilitate understanding and behavioural change. In villages like Nekede and Obibi, local NGOs have developed educational materials that link Sustainable Development Goals targets with the spiritual and communal significance of Ubomuzor, disseminating them through community meetings and local radio programs (Author Last Name Page Number). This approach addresses language and literacy barriers that frequently hinder the adoption of proper hygiene practices. Moreover, by connecting modern knowledge with familiar indigenous concepts, these efforts have effectively increased handwashing and safe water use in these communities.

5. Integrating Customary and Governmental Governance for Resource Management

As an adjunct to the above, there is also a need to foster collaboration between customary and governmental institutions, which is vital for integrated governance and resource management. In the broader Owerri area, coordination forums have been established in which traditional rulers, water agency officials, and NGOs meet regularly to align strategies (Author Last Name Page Number). These forums help resolve conflicts between indigenous authorities and statutory regulations by harmonising the roles of the two. For instance, in Eziama, joint monitoring committees now oversee water-source protection, blending community norms observed during Ubomuzor with official health standards.

6. A Multi-Pronged Model for Ubomuzor-Based SDG 6 Implementation

Applying this multi-pronged model to overcome challenges to Ubomuzor-based SDG 6 implementation involves several strategies: respecting and integrating cultural values in development projects, as seen in Amakohia and Obinze; empowering traditional leaders to serve as advocates and facilitators, exemplified by Umuguma and Irete; investing in water and sanitation infrastructure sanctified by Ubomuzor rituals, evident in Ihiagwa and Naze; enhancing education and communication in Igbo to foster behavioural change, demonstrated

by initiatives in Nekede and Obibi; and strengthening partnerships between indigenous governance and governmental institutions, as practised in Eziama (Author Last Name Page Number). This culturally attuned, participatory, and infrastructure-supported approach offers the most significant promise for achieving SDG 6 among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria, leveraging the rich heritage of Ubomuzor to create sustainable access to water and sanitation. By blending indigenous knowledge with contemporary development frameworks, communities can advance health, dignity, and environmental sustainability.

Concluding Remarks

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 6), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, provide a global framework for promoting peace, prosperity, and sustainable development, with SDG 6 specifically focusing on access to clean water and sanitation (United Nations). While the goals are commendable, their implementation largely top-down and standardised has often failed to achieve meaningful results in rural and culturally diverse contexts. Reliance on uniform indicators and policy-driven interventions often overlooks indigenous knowledge systems, social networks, and culturally embedded practices that are critical to sustainability (Okeke 56; Nnewi 72). As a result, progress toward SDG 6 in many Nigerian communities remains slow, with persistent water scarcity, poor sanitation, and limited community engagement.

A promising alternative is the integration of home-grown approaches such as the Mbom-Uzo festival, a traditional Igbo cultural practice with strong social, spiritual, and communal dimensions. Mbom-Uzo serves as a mechanism for collective action, resource management, and community cohesion, all of which are essential for adequate water and sanitation governance (Sam 199; Sloane 2025). Through rituals and communal participation, the festival sanctifies water sources, fosters shared responsibility, and reinforces compliance with communal rules, enhancing the sustainability of water and sanitation initiatives. By leveraging indigenous knowledge and social structures, development interventions can bridge the gap between formal SDG frameworks and local realities, ensuring that efforts are both culturally relevant and practical.

Despite its potential, Mbom-Uzo has limitations, including variations in ritual practice, limited scalability, and occasional conflicts with statutory regulations. These challenges can be mitigated through deliberate strategies. Integrating Mbom-Uzo rituals with modern infrastructure such as boreholes, latrines, and handwashing stations provides tangible benefits while reinforcing cultural practices (Okeke 59). Enhancing education and communication in local languages strengthens understanding of hygiene and sanitation principles, aligning spiritual significance with contemporary knowledge. Collaboration among traditional leaders, government agencies, and NGOs can harmonise authority, reduce conflicts, and institutionalise oversight of water sources (Nnewi 75). Finally, documenting and standardising best practices across communities facilitates replication without compromising cultural authenticity.

In conclusion, conventional SDG 6 tools have not fully delivered the desired outcomes, but integrating Mbom-Uzo offers a culturally grounded, participatory pathway to improve water and sanitation in Igbo communities. By addressing its limitations through infrastructure, education, governance collaboration, and knowledge sharing, Mbom-Uzo can transform from a symbolic festival into an effective instrument for achieving SDG 6. This approach

underscores the importance of embedding development initiatives within local social, spiritual, and cultural contexts to ensure sustainable, inclusive progress.

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