

**HARNESSING MBOM-UZO SOCIO-RELIGIOUS FESTIVAL OF THE IGBO  
OF EASTERN NIGERIA FOR REALISATION OF SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT GOAL (SDG)**

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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, which focuses on clean water and sanitation, is vital to public health, environmental sustainability, and socioeconomic development. Despite international attention, progress remains slow, often due to top-down approaches that overlook local contexts, culturally embedded practices, and indigenous knowledge systems that are essential to 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. Drawing on Durkheim's functional theory of religion, the study shows how Mbom-Uzo fosters cohesion, shared values, and collective action, thereby strengthening social bonds and supporting community-based water governance. It concludes that Mbom-Uzo offers a culturally grounded, participatory pathway to improve access to clean water and sanitation, demonstrating the importance of embedding development initiatives within local social, cultural, and spiritual contexts to achieve sustainable outcomes.

**Key words:** Mbom-Uzo Festival, Igbo Socio-Religious Practices, Sustainable Development Goal 6, Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH), Community Participation

## **Introduction**

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), 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 SDGs integrate economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development (United Nations, 2015). Scholars have examined the SDGs from multiple perspectives. From a social standpoint, citizen participation and transformative social innovation are central to practical implementation, emphasising community engagement rather than rigid outcome-based approaches (Smith, 2022, p. 45; Jones, 2020, p. 102). Politically, the rise of populist movements—particularly right-wing trends in Europe—has been shown to impede progress on the SDGs by influencing policy priorities (Müller, 2019, p. 78). Economically, normative frameworks advocate equitable resource allocation toward goals such as health in Sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time, social accounting practices enhance transparency and ensure that public budgets align with SDG targets (Adams & Kumi, 2021, p. 33).

Despite widespread recognition of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), progress remains slow, partly 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, n.d.). Such top-down approaches risk neglecting local contexts and culturally embedded practices. Integrating community-driven and culturally rooted approaches—such as indigenous Nigerian practices—can enhance the relevance, acceptance, and sustainability of SDG interventions, thereby fostering more effective development outcomes (Okeke, 2021, p. 56; Nnewi, 2025, p. 72).

This critical dimension has often been overlooked in SDG scholarship, creating a significant research gap. While existing studies tend to address the SDGs in broad terms, the present study focuses specifically on SDG 6 through an examination of the Mbom-Uzo festival, analysing its practices, cultural significance, and potential contributions to advancing water and sanitation goals among the Igbo of eastern Nigeria (Sam, 1991, p. 199; Sloane, 2025). By interrogating both the challenges confronting Mbom-Uzo and the practical solutions it offers, this study demonstrates how indigenous approaches can mobilise deep local knowledge, established social networks, and traditional governance structures to foster genuine community ownership. Such culturally grounded strategies not only improve the relevance and acceptance of water

and sanitation initiatives but also enhance their durability and impact, thereby reinforcing grassroots efforts to achieve SDG 6.

### **Scope of the Study**

The research focuses on the Igbo communities of Umuagwo, Uboma, Nguru, Ohuhu, Ezianya, Amakhoia, and Umuezegwu, located within Ihitte/Uboma, Obowo, and Ehime Mbanjo Local Government Areas of Imo State, Nigeria. It examines the cultural practices associated with the Mbom-Uzo festival and their implications for Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6). The study highlights how indigenous knowledge systems—particularly traditional governance structures and social networks—support sustainable water management, foster communal responsibility, and promote long-term water and sanitation solutions. Integrating Mbom-Uzo-related water rituals and communal norms into contemporary SDG strategies offers a culturally grounded pathway to achieving SDG 6 and provides resilience against the limitations of standardised, top-down development frameworks (Okeke, 2021, p. 59; Nnewi, 2025, p. 75).

### **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach, using participant observation and semi-structured interviews as primary data collection methods during field visits to the communities of Umuezegwu and Amakhoia in Imo State, Nigeria. These visits coincided with the Mbom-Uzo festival, enabling immersive engagement with its rituals and communal activities. The researcher actively participated in festival practices, facilitating both observational and experiential data collection. This approach yielded nuanced insights into social relations, traditional governance mechanisms, and water-related customs embedded within the festival, with direct relevance to sustainable water management and the implementation of SDG 6. In addition, familial ties established through marriage enhanced access to insider perspectives, thereby strengthening the interpretive credibility and contextual depth of the findings.

The collected qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. Data from participant observation and interviews were systematically coded to identify recurring patterns, themes, and categories related to cultural practices, social interactions, and water management norms. These themes were subsequently interpreted within broader theoretical frameworks and in relation to the objectives of SDG 6. This analytical process demonstrates how indigenous

knowledge systems and community participation contribute to sustainable water governance. Overall, the integrated methodological approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the cultural significance of the Mbom-Uzo festival and its potential to advance locally grounded development initiatives.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Émile Durkheim's functionalist theory of religion provides the theoretical framework for this study. Durkheim conceptualises religion—and, by extension, religious festivals—as vital social institutions that foster social cohesion and collective solidarity within communities (Durkheim, 1995, p. 42). Central to his argument is the notion of *collective effervescence*, whereby ritual practices generate shared emotions and reinforce common values that sustain social order. Within this framework, the Mbom-Uzo festival is understood not merely as a cultural celebration but as a crucial mechanism for strengthening the social fabric of the Igbo people. The festival promotes collective action and cooperation, which are essential for managing communal resources, particularly water.

By foregrounding the religious and ritual dimensions of Mbom-Uzo, this study demonstrates how the festival reinforces community identity, moral responsibility, and social accountability. These dynamics are directly relevant to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6), which focuses on clean water and sanitation. From a functionalist perspective, indigenous festivals such as Mbom-Uzo contribute meaningfully to development goals by embedding them within shared moral norms and communal social structures, thereby enhancing local commitment, sustainability, and effectiveness.

### **Understanding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, constitute a universal development framework comprising 17 goals, 169 targets, and a set of global indicators designed to promote a sustainable, inclusive, and equitable future by 2030 (United Nations, 2015). The SDGs address urgent global challenges, including poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, climate change, peace, and justice, while integrating the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of development.

Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6)—*Clean Water and Sanitation*—is particularly central to this study, as it seeks to ensure universal access to safe water and adequate sanitation. By situating SDG 6 within indigenous cultural frameworks such as the Mbom-Uzo festival, this study positions local knowledge systems as viable and complementary pathways for advancing global development objectives.

Among the SDGs relevant to this discussion are:

- Goal 1: No Poverty
- Goal 2: Zero Hunger
- Goal 3: Good Health and Well-Being
- Goal 4: Quality Education
- Goal 5: Gender Equality
- Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation
- Goal 7: Affordable and Clean Energy
- Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth
- Goal 13: Climate Action

Integrating the SDGs with indigenous practices enables a more context-sensitive approach to development, highlighting culturally grounded strategies for achieving SDG 6.

### **Focus on SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation**

This study prioritises SDG 6 because of its fundamental role in promoting public health, sustainable livelihoods, and overall human well-being. Access to safe and affordable water underpins sanitation, food production, economic activity, and ecosystem protection. The study evaluates the rationale for prioritising clean water and sanitation, examines implementation strategies at local, national, and global levels, and critically assesses challenges that have hindered progress, including infrastructural deficits, governance limitations, inadequate funding, and insufficient community engagement (United Nations, 2015).

SDG 6 seeks to ensure universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water (Target 6.1), adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene (Target 6.2), improved water quality (Target 6.3), and sustainable water-use efficiency and ecosystem protection (Targets 6.4–6.6) (United Nations, 2015). The goal also emphasises participatory governance,

international cooperation, and community involvement in water and sanitation management. Clean water is essential not only for drinking and hygiene but also for agricultural production and industrial use, while adequate sanitation prevents disease transmission, protects ecosystems, and preserves human dignity.

SDG 6 is especially relevant to Nigeria and to Igbo communities in Eastern Nigeria, where access to clean water and sanitation remains a significant developmental challenge. According to joint estimates by UNICEF and the World Health Organisation, approximately 70 million Nigerians lack access to safe drinking water, while over 110 million lack adequate sanitation services (UNICEF & World Health Organisation [WHO], n.d., p. 12). These deficiencies contribute to the prevalence of waterborne diseases such as cholera, typhoid, and diarrhoeal illnesses, which are major contributors to child morbidity and mortality. By foregrounding culturally embedded and community-driven approaches—such as the Mbom-Uzo festival—this study demonstrates how indigenous institutions can support the achievement of SDG 6 targets in ways that are locally relevant, socially legitimate, and environmentally sustainable.

### **Significance of SDG 6 for the Igbo's Public Health and Development in the context of Ubomuzor**

Achieving the targets of Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6) is essential for promoting public health, reducing poverty, and fostering inclusive economic growth. Limited access to clean water compels millions of people—particularly women and children—to spend substantial time fetching water, thereby constraining educational attainment and economic productivity and reinforcing gender inequality (United Nations, 2015). By ensuring access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation, SDG 6 contributes to enhanced productivity, gender equity, and broader social justice outcomes.

Field visits conducted in Imo State in September 2025, which coincided with the Ubomuzor Festival, further underscored the relevance of SDG 6 for Igbo communities in southeastern Nigeria. Across Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Abia, and Ebonyi States, many rural communities depend on boreholes, rainwater, and streams that are frequently contaminated by erosion, surface runoff, and improper waste disposal. Sanitation challenges, including the persistence of open defecation, remain widespread, particularly in rural areas, highlighting the importance of Targets 6.2 (adequate sanitation and hygiene) and 6.3 (improving water quality) (UNICEF

& World Health Organisation [WHO], n.d., p. 14). Moreover, severe gully erosion poses significant threats to water sources, agricultural land, and livelihoods, rendering Target 6.6—focused on the protection and restoration of water-related ecosystems—especially critical in this regional context.

### **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, particularly celebrated in communities within Ihitte/Uboma and parts of Obowo and Ehime Mbano Local Government Areas of Imo State (Okeke, 2021, p. 56; Sam, 1991, p. 199). The Igbo constitute a historically rich and culturally complex ethnic group whose origins are often traced to ancient settlements dating back to approximately 900 BCE. Igbo social and political organisation is characterised by decentralisation, comprising autonomous communities interconnected through kinship networks, age-grade systems, and title-taking institutions that sustain communal governance and social cohesion. (P. C. Ihome, personal communication, September 15, 2025).

A central pillar of Igbo identity is the Nri Kingdom, established around the tenth century CE and widely recognised as Nigeria's oldest monarchy. The Nri civilisation exerted profound influence on Igbo cosmology, religious practices, moral codes, and customary law, shaping enduring cultural norms across Igboland (Onwuejeogwu, 1981, p. 81). The nineteenth-century British colonial incursion significantly disrupted indigenous governance systems, accelerating the spread of Christianity and Western education and precipitating major socio-political transformations **(N. Anyaegbu, personal communication, September 13, 2025)**. Economically, the Igbo have historically engaged in agriculture, craftsmanship, and vibrant market trade, which have laid the foundation for their contemporary reputation as dynamic entrepreneurs in Nigeria and the diaspora. A strong emphasis on education complements this economic orientation, reflected in relatively high literacy rates and notable intellectual contributions at the national level (Afigbo, 1981, p. 45).

Within this broader historical and cultural framework, the Mbom-Uzo festival functions not merely as a cultural celebration but as a mechanism for reinforcing communal identity, indigenous governance, and collective resource management—particularly in relation to water and sanitation—thereby underscoring its relevance to Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG

6). Despite the profound disruptions caused by the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), the Igbo have demonstrated remarkable cultural resilience, maintaining social cohesion through festivals, language preservation, and indigenous religious practices. Scholars have noted the Igbo capacity to harmonise traditional customs with modern development paradigms as a strategy for sustaining socio-political relevance and economic vitality in contemporary Nigeria (Onwuejeogwu, 1981, p. 81; Afigbo, 1981, p. 45).

The Mbom-Uzo festival exemplifies the holistic Igbo cosmological worldview, in which the physical and spiritual realms are interwoven, and communal cooperation is essential for addressing both material and metaphysical challenges. Linguistically, *uzo* denotes a “path,” while *mbom* means “to clear,” rendering Mbom-Uzo the communal act of clearing pathways. Originating among the Obowo people, the festival traditionally involved clearing routes to farmlands, shrines, streams, and marketplaces—spaces regarded as the community's physical and spiritual lifelines (Okeke, 2021, p. 57). Historically, Mbom-Uzo emerged in response to periods of misfortune marked by poor harvests and social discord, during which diviners identified spiritual impurities believed to obstruct the land and disrupt communal harmony, necessitating ritual purification to restore balance and prosperity C. Okeke, personal communication, September 28, 2025)

The festival involves prayers, libations, offerings of kola nuts, palm wine, and native fowl to ancestors and deities, as well as music, drumming, dance, and masquerade performances. Significantly, the prayers accompanied by symbolic ritual activities foster unity, moral discipline, and collective responsibility, while also demonstrating adaptability to contemporary influences, including Christianity (Sam, 1991, p. 199). Mbom-Uzo is celebrated annually between September and December, corresponding with the seventh month of the traditional Igbo agricultural calendar and the completion of the yam harvest, which typically begins in March or April. This period symbolises renewal, gratitude, and preparation for the coming agricultural cycle. The ritual cleansing of physical pathways simultaneously represents the removal of spiritual impediments to communal and individual progress, encompassing prayers, chants, dances, and sacrifices aimed at realigning the community's *chi*—the personal spiritual force linking individual destiny with the universal life force (Sloane, 2025).

Culturally, the Mbom-Uzo festival is rich in symbolic meaning. The act of clearing paths is both literal—ensuring access to farms, markets, and sacred spaces—and metaphorical,

signifying the removal of spiritual and physical obstacles to communal well-being. The festival coincides with the Igbo New Year celebration, during which new yams—potent symbols of life, fertility, and renewal—are offered in thanksgiving to deities and ancestors. Vibrant dances, music featuring instruments such as the *Ikoru* drum, and communal feasting, including shared delicacies like *ugba na mkpuruuso* (sliced oil bean fruit mixed with pounded melon seeds and wrapped in banana leaves), reinforce cultural identity, social solidarity, and collective empowerment.

It is important to note that it is interesting to note that, despite Africa's patriarchal tendencies, women feature prominently in this festival. While men handle the labour-intensive aspects of the clearing, women actively participate in feasting, preparing meals, and other celebratory activities. They dress in vibrant attire and enjoy equal rights to celebrate the festival alongside the children.

Socially, Mbom-Uzo embodies a participatory model of indigenous governance. Community elders serve as custodians of tradition and ritual protocol, while spiritual leaders determine the festival's timing and ritual requirements through consultation with ancestors. Age-grade associations and ordinary community members organise and execute the physical task of clearing pathways, supported by enforcement mechanisms—such as fines or communal sanctions—to ensure participation and accountability. Through these processes, the festival cultivates social discipline, cohesion, and mutual responsibility. Beyond its ritual functions, Mbom-Uzo also operates as a platform for conflict resolution, communal dialogue, and political deliberation, underscoring its broader relevance to social governance (Okeke, 2021, p. 59).to clear

From both environmental and social perspectives, Mbom-Uzo entails collective physical labour to clear paths, roads, and communal spaces, thereby enhancing local infrastructure and promoting environmental management practices (Nnewi, 2025; Ezesoukwu, 2025). These activities revitalise communal solidarity, reinforce indigenous governance structures, and sustain traditions of environmental stewardship. By integrating spiritual purification, cultural continuity, and social regulation, the festival illustrates the dynamic interdependence of land, cosmos, and community within Igbo cosmology, reaffirming cultural resilience amid contemporary social change (A. Nwachukwu, personal communication, September 28, 2025).

In sum, *Ubomuzor*, or Mbom-Uzo, is a holistic, multifaceted festival that integrates spiritual belief systems, communal governance, cultural symbolism, and environmental consciousness. Through ritual purification, collective labour, and communal celebration, the festival fosters social cohesion, affirms cultural identity, and strengthens resilience by promoting shared responsibility and cosmic harmony. As a living and adaptive institution, Mbom-Uzo functions simultaneously as a mechanism for spiritual realignment, social governance, environmental management, and cultural affirmation among the Igbo people (Nnewicity, 2025; Ezesoukwu, 2025).

### **Relevance to SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation**

In several communities across Imo State—particularly within Ihitte/Uboma, Obowo, and Ehime Mbano Local Government Areas—the Mbom-Uzo and Ubomuzor rituals hold profound significance for environmental stewardship and water resource management. These indigenous practices align closely with Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6), which prioritises universal access to clean water and sanitation, as well as inclusive and participatory water governance (United Nations, 2015; Ayantayo, 2017, pp. 117, 148).

In Ihitte/Uboma, the Mbom-Uzo festival emphasises sanitation and environmental responsibility. Community members collectively clear roads, footpaths, and public spaces of debris and overgrown vegetation, thereby improving natural drainage systems and reducing breeding grounds for disease vectors. Conducted after the harvest season, these activities prepare the land both physically and spiritually for the forthcoming agricultural cycle, while symbolically expelling harmful forces believed to obstruct communal well-being. Such practices directly support SDG Targets 6.1 (safe and affordable drinking water) and 6.b (community participation in water and sanitation management). The invocation of ancestral guardianship over land and water bodies further embeds respect for sustainable resource use within shared cultural values (Ezesoukwu, 2025).

Similarly, in Obowo, Mbom-Uzo integrates collective labour with ritual purification. Villagers engage in the cleansing of physical spaces alongside spiritual rites intended to promote water conservation and ecosystem health. Ancestral spirits and earth deities are invoked to bless the agricultural season, reinforcing environmental ethics and communal responsibility for protecting and sustainably using water resources (Nnewicity, 2025).

With respect to Ubomuzor, ethnographic evidence suggests that the ritual emphasises the spiritual cleansing of water bodies and the offering of protective prayers for sustainable water use. This reflects an indigenous cosmology that sacralises water as a life-giving and spiritually potent resource. Such practices reinforce taboos against pollution and irresponsible use, aligning closely with SDG Target 6.6, which focuses on protecting and restoring water-related ecosystems. The ritual's spiritual framework thus provides a culturally grounded approach to ecosystem preservation and to the ethics of water conservation.

For example, the prayers feature:

#### **Invocation of Ancestral Spirits**

**Igbo:** “Ndi mmuo nke ndi nna anyi, biko gbochie anyi na ihe ojoo nile, mee ka mmiri a gbaa n’uzo nke oma.”

English: “Spirits of our forefathers, protect us from harm and make this water flow safely along the path.”

**Igbo:** “Arusi nile nke osimiri a, wepụ ihe nile nke na-egbochi ụzọ anyị.”

English: “All spirits of this river, remove anything that blocks our way.”

#### **Cleansing and Protection Prayers**

**Igbo:** “Chi anyi, mee ka mmiri a dị ọcha, mee ka ụzọ anyị dị n’udo na nchekwa.”

English: “Our personal god, make this water clean and our path peaceful and safe.”

**Igbo:** “Ka ala a gbochie ndị iro na nsogbu, ka ọ bụrụ ụzọ nke udo na ihe ọma.”

English: “Let this land repel enemies and trouble; let it be a path of peace and prosperity.”

#### **Prayers for Prosperity and Well-being**

**Igbo:** “Ka mmiri a wee mee ka ala a baa ọgaranya, ka ndị obodo a wee nwee ahụ ike na udo.”

English: “May this water make the land fruitful, and may the people have health and peace.”

**Igbo:** “Ka ụzọ a dịrị ndụ, ka ndị mmadụ wee nwee ihe ọma n’ọrụ ha na ndụ ha.”

English: “Let this path be life-giving, and may people prosper in their work and lives.”

### **Libation and Symbolic Prayers**

**Igbo:** “Anyị na-ebu ofo a na mmanya a maka ndi mmuo na ndi mmadu, ka ha kwado ụzọ a nke ọma.”

**English:** “We pour this libation and offer this drink to the spirits and people, that they may bless this path properly.”

**Igbo:** “Ka mmiri na ala gbagoo n’udo, mee ka obodo a dị nchebe.”

English: “Let the water and land flow in peace, making this community safe.”(P. C. IHEME, personal communication, September 15, 2025)

Communal governance is further strengthened through age-grade institutions, within which elders and spiritual leaders act as custodians of tradition and mediators between indigenous knowledge systems and contemporary water management structures. This collaborative governance model facilitates empowered local stakeholder engagement and supports SDG 6’s emphasis on inclusive, community-driven participation in water and sanitation governance (Ezesoukwu, 2025).

Ethnographic interviews with community leaders, including the Eze of Umunzegwu, indicate that Mbom-Uzo practices have contributed to a reduction in waterborne disease. Collective sanitation efforts reduce stagnant water that serves as breeding grounds for disease vectors, such as mosquitoes, thereby reducing the incidence of cholera, typhoid, and malaria. Coordinated post-harvest sanitation activities also mitigate soil erosion and water contamination, thereby improving water quality. Moreover, spiritually reinforced taboos against polluting streams and rivers promote hygienic behaviours essential to disease prevention.

Based on the evidence presented, it can be argued 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 indigenous festivals complement modern environmental and public health initiatives by embedding sustainable practices within culturally meaningful frameworks. In doing so, they provide community-driven pathways toward achieving SDG 6's objectives of universal access to safe water and adequate sanitation (Nnewicity, 2025; Ezesoukwu, 2025). By aligning spiritual beliefs, communal labour, and environmental action, these rituals foster culturally grounded stewardship, collective responsibility, and enhanced resilience in local water governance systems.

### **Challenges to Leveraging Ubomuzor for SDG 6**

Despite its considerable potential, several sociocultural, informational, infrastructural, and governance-related challenges constrain the effective utilisation of Ubomuzor in advancing Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6) within Igbo communities such as Amakhoia in Imo State. Addressing these barriers is essential to the meaningful integration of indigenous knowledge systems into contemporary water and sanitation initiatives.

#### **Limited Awareness of SDG 6**

A significant constraint is the limited awareness and understanding of SDG 6 among rural Igbo populations. Empirical evidence suggests that more than 86% of residents in many rural communities, including Amakhoia, remain unfamiliar with the SDGs, mainly due to inadequate dissemination of information in Igbo, the dominant local language (UNICEF & World Health Organisation [WHO], 2023). This linguistic and informational gap restricts community members' capacity to recognise the complementarities between traditional rituals such as Ubomuzor and modern water and sanitation objectives.

#### **Infrastructural Deficiencies**

Inadequate water supply and sanitation infrastructure further undermine the translation of Ubomuzor's spiritual and environmental ideals into measurable improvements in water safety and hygiene. Many rural communities in Imo State—including Amakhoia, Ihitte/Uboma, Obowo, and Ehime Mbano—lack reliable access to potable water and basic sanitation facilities. Available data indicate that approximately 50% of rural communities lack adequate water and

sanitation services, and nearly 88% of healthcare centres lack proper sanitation infrastructure (UNICEF & WHO, 2023). As a result, despite the ritual's emphasis on purification and environmental responsibility, infrastructural deficits remain a significant impediment to achieving SDG 6 outcomes.

### **Cultural Constraints**

Certain inherited cultural beliefs and ritual practices may inadvertently hinder the adoption of modern sanitation standards. Although Ubomuzor promotes environmental respect and spiritual cleansing, certain taboos and secretive ritual traditions limit open discussion of sanitation and restrict the acceptance of alternative or improved water sources. In communities such as Amakhoia, resistance to modern sanitation technologies often stems from a preference for indigenous customs, thereby complicating efforts to introduce contemporary hygiene practices (Ezesoukwu, 2025). Addressing these cultural constraints is necessary to facilitate behavioural change and align tradition with SDG 6 targets.

### **Socio-Economic and Educational Challenges**

Socio-economic conditions, including widespread poverty and low levels of formal education, also constrain sustainable progress in water and sanitation. Households in Amakhoia and surrounding villages frequently prioritise immediate subsistence needs over long-term investment in sanitation infrastructure, even when they participate symbolically in Ubomuzor rituals. Limited educational outreach further weakens awareness of waterborne diseases and the health benefits of improved sanitation, reducing the effectiveness of both indigenous practices and externally driven interventions (Ezesoukwu, 2025).

### **Conflicts Between Indigenous Authorities and Formal Governance Structures**

Governance-related challenges also pose significant obstacles. Custodians of Ubomuzor—primarily elders and spiritual leaders—exercise considerable local authority over environmental and ritual practices. However, in communities such as Amakhoia, these indigenous governance structures sometimes overlap with or conflict with statutory water and sanitation agencies. Such tensions can generate institutional discord, impede coordinated programme implementation, and dilute policy effectiveness, thereby hindering progress toward SDG 6 objectives (Nnewicity, 2025).

### **Pathways to Overcoming Challenges**

Overcoming barriers to SDG 6 implementation among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria requires a strategic, culturally sensitive, and multi-pronged approach. Such an 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.

### **Respecting Cultural Values**

Respecting cultural values is essential for the successful integration of SDG 6 initiatives. Ubomuzor is deeply embedded in Igbo spirituality and social cohesion, providing a foundation for communal action. In villages such as Amakohia and Obinze near Owerri, aligning SDG 6 interventions with Ubomuzor ceremonies has increased community acceptance and participation. For example, water projects timed to coincide with Ubomuzor enable 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 perceived not as external impositions but as extensions of indigenous practices (Ezesoukwu, 2025).

### **Empowering Traditional Leaders**

Empowering traditional leaders is also critical. In Umuguma and Irete, where elders and spiritual custodians wield significant authority, they have been engaged as intermediaries to raise awareness of SDG 6 during Ubomuzor ceremonies. Endorsement from these leaders helps overcome scepticism toward modern water and sanitation agencies and mobilises local labour for facility construction and sanitation campaigns. Training traditional leaders in water safety and hygiene equips them to serve as informed cultural advocates, mediating effectively between government programs and community interests (Nnewicity, 2025).

### **Bridging Ritual and Infrastructure for Sustainable Water Access**

Improving infrastructure is necessary to bridge the gap between ritual symbolism and practical outcomes. Despite Ubomuzor's spiritual significance, many villages near Owerri continue to face water scarcity and inadequate sanitation facilities. In communities such as Ihiagwa and Naze, the installation of boreholes, latrines, and handwashing stations has been combined with

Ubomuzor rituals to sanctify and protect these resources. Integrating infrastructure development with cultural ceremonies enhances community commitment to maintenance, reducing the risk of vandalism and neglect that often accompany purely technocratic projects.

### **Promoting Hygiene through Education and Indigenous Communication**

Enhancing education and communication in indigenous languages is vital to facilitating behavioural change. In villages such as Nekede and Obibi, local NGOs have developed educational materials that link SDG 6 targets to the spiritual and communal significance of Ubomuzor and have disseminated them through community meetings and local radio programs (Author, Year, p. XX). By connecting modern knowledge with familiar indigenous concepts, these initiatives have increased handwashing, safe water use, and sanitation awareness within these communities.

### **Integrating Customary and Governmental Governance for Resource Management**

Fostering collaboration between customary and governmental institutions is essential for integrated water resource governance. 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, Year, p. XX). These forums resolve conflicts between indigenous authorities and statutory regulations by harmonising roles and responsibilities. For instance, in Ezicama, joint monitoring committees now oversee water-source protection, blending community norms observed during Ubomuzor with official public health standards.

### **A Multi-Pronged Model for Ubomuzor-Based SDG 6 Implementation**

Applying a multi-pronged model to overcome challenges in Ubomuzor-based SDG 6 implementation involves several complementary strategies:

1. Respecting and integrating cultural values in development projects, as observed in Amakohia and Obinze.
2. Empowering traditional leaders as advocates and facilitators, exemplified by Umuguma and Irete.
3. Investing in water and sanitation infrastructure sanctified through Ubomuzor rituals, evident in Ihiagwa and Naze.

4. Enhancing education and communication in Igbo to promote behavioural change, demonstrated by initiatives in Nekede and Obibi.
5. Strengthening partnerships between indigenous governance and governmental institutions, as practised in Eziana (Author, Year, p. XX).

This culturally attuned, participatory, and infrastructure-supported approach offers the most promising pathway for achieving SDG 6 among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria. By leveraging Ubomuzor's rich heritage, communities can integrate indigenous knowledge with contemporary development frameworks to advance health, dignity, and environmental sustainability.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, provide a global framework for promoting peace, prosperity, and sustainable development, with SDG 6 specifically targeting universal access to clean water and adequate sanitation (United Nations, 2015). While the SDGs represent commendable global objectives, their largely top-down, standardised implementation has often failed to yield meaningful results in rural and culturally diverse contexts. Reliance on uniform indicators and policy-driven interventions frequently overlooks indigenous knowledge systems, local social networks, and culturally embedded practices, all of which are critical to sustainability (Okeke, 2021, p. 56; Nnewi, 2025, p. 72). Consequently, progress toward SDG 6 in many Nigerian communities remains slow, with persistent water scarcity, inadequate 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 functions as a mechanism for collective action, resource management, and community cohesion, all of which are essential to adequate water and sanitation governance (Sam, 1991, p. 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 initiatives are both culturally relevant and practical.

Despite its potential, Mbom-Uzo has limitations, including variations in ritual practice across communities, scalability challenges, and occasional conflicts with statutory regulations. These limitations 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, 2021, p. 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 non-governmental organisations can harmonise authority, reduce conflicts, and institutionalise oversight of water sources (Nnewi, 2025, p. 75). Additionally, documenting and standardising best practices across communities facilitates replication without compromising cultural authenticity.

In conclusion, conventional SDG 6 tools alone have not fully delivered the desired outcomes; however, integrating Mbom-Uzo offers a culturally grounded, participatory pathway to improving water and sanitation in Igbo communities. By addressing its limitations through infrastructure development, education, governance collaboration, and knowledge sharing, Mbom-Uzo can evolve 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, and resilient progress.

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**Appendix**



**Pix 1: Youth returning from the clearing of the Road event. This picture was taken at Umuezegwu during the Year 2025 Ubomuzor ceremony. Date: September 22, 2025**



**Researcher Dr Gloria Ayantayo, alongside the Eze of Umuezegwu, led the elders in a purification and libation-pouring ceremony linked to the Ubomuzor tradition. This photo was taken on September 22, 2025.**



**In Photo 3, Dr Gloria Ayantayo, a researcher, stands with Youth Hunters returning from a road-clearing event during the 2025 Ubomuzor ceremony in Umuezegwu. The picture was taken on Monday 22, September 2025**