

## Sustainable Livelihoods in Rural Uganda— Programmes, Projects, and Participants in the Face of Pandemics

BETTY C MUBANGIZI & NIYI ADEKANLA

**Abstract** This study examines institutions' contributions to sustainable livelihood activities in rural Uganda, focusing on how these activities adapt in times of crisis and what resilience mechanisms might enhance recovery from disasters. Centred on the Kabuyanda sub-county selected for its vulnerability to frequent droughts and floods, this research employs the sustainable livelihoods framework to investigate institutional roles, community engagement, and the resilience capacity of developmental projects. Data was gathered through a household-level survey, targeting 400 representative households from the 26,000 in Kabuyanda, conducted in November 2021 via the online KoboToolbox platform. The household-focused sampling approach provided nuanced insights into governance processes and relationships from the perspective of governance recipients. Descriptive statistics, including frequency tables and graphs, were used to analyse the data. This study highlights how institutional support, beneficiary participation, and resilience-oriented project designs collectively foster durable livelihoods. The findings underscore the necessity of resilience-focused strategies in sustainable rural development, providing critical insights for policymakers to align local and global recovery efforts during COVID-19.

**Keywords:** • disasters • governance networks • rural • livelihoods • local government

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CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESS: Betty C Mubangizi, Professor, NRF/SARChI Chair in Sustainable Rural Livelihoods, University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Management, IT and Governance, Westville, 4000, Durban, South Africa, email: Mubangizib@ukzn.ac.za. Niyi Adekanla, Researcher, Policy Innovation Centre, Plot 785, Unity Bank Tower, Herbert Macaulay Way, Abuja, Nigeria, email: niyi.adekanla@nesgroup.org.

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## 1 Introduction

All countries experience natural disasters in some form, and Uganda is no exception. The preparedness for such disasters and the ability to recover from them varies from country to country based on the level of consciousness to resilience building via risk reducing programmes (Mavhura, Manyangadze, & Aryal, 2021). Within a given country, the ability to recover from disasters varies based on socioeconomic status, with the rich and well-off having the inherent capacity to recover from disasters faster than the poor. Spatial differences also play a role, and rural areas already battling with a range of socio-economic challenges are less likely to recover from disasters as fast as their urban counterparts would. According to Trading Economics (2022), a database of socio-economic indicators, Uganda's rural population stood at 75.05 % of the total population in 2020. The majority of these are poor and dependent on subsistence farming.

Expectedly, appropriate poverty-targeted programmes and policy are the practical panacea for the challenges that come with rural disadvantage (Razavi et al., 2022). The rural disadvantaged should be at the centre of asset-based developmental planning (Wood, South, Coan, Bagnall, & Rippon, 2021). Like any other developing country, it must be noted that the government of Uganda addresses rural poverty through various mechanisms. Specific to Uganda, through the overarching National Development Plan (NDP), the Uganda government developed a comprehensive policy aimed at guiding the country's development planning (MoFEDP, 2000; Fan & Zhang, 2008).

Livelihood-sensitive programmes aim to include the three levels of social and economic influence of an average rural dweller: individual, community, and organisational (Woodward et al., 2021). Hayhurst (2014) states that a sustainable livelihood is essential to building the wealth necessary for any population. He believes that all hands must be on deck to achieve sustainable living. This is similar to the case of the partnership between an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) operating from Europe and another NGO resident in Uganda, which created a platform for vulnerable Ugandan girls to become social entrepreneurs in the field of sports. He further enjoined that NGOs and their partners could do more in educating, financing and giving technical support to social entrepreneurs, especially start-ups (Hayhurst, 2014).

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is germane to social developmental programmes. The social programmes are designed to adapt sustainable development targets to their operations. However, inhibiting sustainability is a likely unsustainable event that organisations do to improve profitability. Corporate social responsibility is adopted to promote social welfare to cushion the effects of

these negative impacts on sustainability. The social entrepreneurs who are beneficiaries of these social programmes are the best fit to bring CSR back to the community. It is also the responsibility of individual beneficiaries to support the maintenance of the common goods from the CSRs (Bansal, Garg, & Sharma, 2019).

The government should spearhead the implementation of these social programmes through the various levels of government. This assumption, however, is based on the influence of government in other climes, such as states in Europe, the United States of America, and even African states like South Africa (Bozhikin, Macke, & da Costa, 2019; Vilakati et al., 2020). In the main, social programmes in Uganda are primarily financed by friends, family, and non-governmental organisations, including faith-based ones (Palmer et al., 2022). The operations of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and faith-based organisations (FBOs) are vastly community-based and at the rural and semi-rural entry points. Despite the many entities involved, Mubangizi (2024) revealed challenges such as disjointed efforts, unequal distribution of resources, compartmentalised thinking that impede effective networking. Networks need to be empowered to carry out the majority of their roles adequately and further help reduce the country's disease burden (Vilakati et al., 2020). Without concerted effort and input from local government, the efforts of NGOs and FBOs are unlikely to yield sustainable livelihoods for the rural poor.

Against this backdrop and from a Public Administration perspective, rural poverty is a source of concern for policymakers and public policy implementers. Perret, Anseeuw, and Mathebula (2005) question the extent to which development policies and programmes have effectively and sustainably improved rural people's lives out of poverty. With this in mind, the research problem may be stated as follows: Various social protection policies, developmental programmes and strategies have failed to substantially reduce the incidence and impact of poverty in rural communities. The missing link in these initiatives appears to be the agency of the rural poor themselves and the facilitating role of local institutions' systems and processes. Further, as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us, social protection and development programmes easily halt in the face of disasters and pandemics. Therefore, the study seeks to identify developmental programmes/projects of the government and other institutions; establish how, if at all they withstand disasters and pandemics; establish who it is that implements these social programmes, and identify the role and contribution of the beneficiaries to the development programmes.

The major contribution of this study is to add to the extant literature on the role of local institutions in driving sustainable livelihood projects that external partners typically initiate. The study further aims to provide suggestions on how to increase

the participation of locally based structures in the context of network governance for sustainable rural livelihoods in Uganda and elsewhere. First, a conceptual discussion of sustainable livelihoods is explored.

## 2 Literature overview

For a long time, the United Nations has actively become involved in several humanitarian activities across Low and Middle-Income Countries (LMIC) in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. These activities are primarily to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that span 15 years, from 2000 to 2015. Ruhira, a cluster of eight villages in southwest Uganda, was chosen to host the Millennium Villages Project (MVP). The only site in Uganda and one of the ten MVP sites on the continent makes Ruhira a place of interest for those seeking to understand the sustainability of development projects and the resilience of rural people. The Millennium Villages Project aims to achieve the Millennium Development Goals in villages across sub-Saharan Africa. The Millennium Villages Project (MVP) was initiated in 2005 to achieve the MDGs in rural villages in sub-Saharan Africa, focusing on quick-win interventions with a view to catalyse the transformation of 'sub-subsistence farmers' into small-scale entrepreneurs (Sendawula, 2008; Ninsima, 2010; Wilson, 2017).

Specifically, several attempts are in place including the Local Government Sector Investment Plan. This Plan encourages investments at the local level in critical areas of service delivery, good governance, and local economic development. In addition, the Rural Financial Services Strategy aims to improve access to financial services in rural areas, encourage savings and investment capital in rural enterprises.

Sustainable livelihoods in Uganda are threatened by several common disasters. For instance, drought and famine occur in a recurring 3-5 year pattern. This challenge leads to food insecurity, undernutrition, cattle rustling, and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (Mayega et al., 2013). In 2008, about 750,000 people died of drought (Government of Uganda (GOU), 2011). Epidemics are the most critical public health emergency in Uganda. The year 2007 alone had five outbreaks in 8 months. Diseases like cholera, smallpox, human influenza, and haemorrhagic fever are some of the most recurring health challenges (Mayega et al., 2013). In addition, Kabuyanda sub-county has a prevalence of malaria disease (the Republic of Uganda, 2019; Tarema et al., 2020). Floods are also common in some parts of the country inspired by climate change and following the El-Niño years. Areas around the Aswa River, Lake Kioga, BUTaleja, Mbale and the suburbs of Kampala are prone to flood disasters. In 2010, floods affected over 350,000 people (Government of Uganda (GOU), 2011). Some other disasters native to Uganda are earthquakes, landslides that killed about 250

people in 2010, hailstorms, and others that have been equally lethal (Mayega et al., 2013; Government of Uganda (GOU), 2011).

However, in the midst of the overarching disasters, developmental projects such as many water projects which have direct health and social implications for the people in Uganda were launched (Kayaga et al., 2020). For instance, the findings according to the Sanitation and Hygiene Applied Research for Equity (SHARE) syndicate purported that the WASH initiative potentially has a strong appeal and positive impact on improved nutrition, diarrhoeal lessening, maternal and child health, psychosocial stress, among others (Kayaga et al., 2020). These water projects' emphasis remains people-centric, which is key to their implementation, subsequent successes, and enormous potential. According to Kayaga et al. (2020), the Multiple-Use Water Services (MUS) initiative is vital as it seeks to expand the benefits of water services to productive uses of water. It ensures water security for health and productive activities while enhancing social equity and reducing poverty (Kayaga et al., 2020). Also, the Water Engineering and Development Centre (WEDC) of Loughborough University in the United Kingdom and the National Water and Sewage Corporation (NWSC) of Uganda jointly sponsored a project called LEAPS (Livelihoods from Enhanced Water Access for the Poor in Slums). The MUS approach has been thriving since the 2000s in these rural areas, improving consumers' livelihoods, especially in a pandemic period such as this (Kayaga et al., 2020).

## **2.1 Sustainable livelihoods, programs and policy in a rural context**

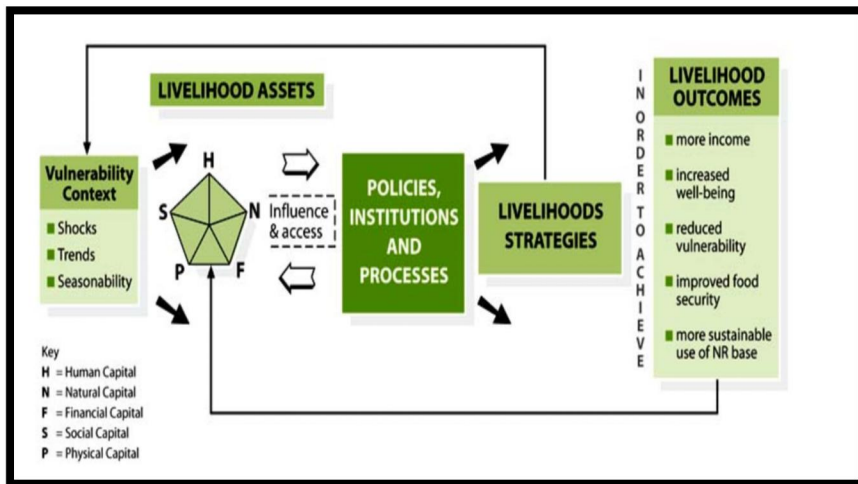
Sustainable rural livelihoods are affected by a complexity of factors ranging from local, national and global structures and systems, all of which affect the access to and control over resources required for livelihood activities. Further, rural livelihoods are affected by institutions and policies that affect poor people's lives, from public and private entities to national policies and local culture (John et al., 2022). The sustainable livelihoods framework provides an opportunity to conceptualise livelihoods in a holistic way, capturing the many complexities of livelihoods, and the constraints and opportunities that they are subjected to (Van Berkum, Dengerink, & Ruben, 2018; March & Failler, 2022). However, Islam et. al. (2022) extend this assertion that developmental programmes should aim at lessening these complexities. Therefore, given the constraints and opportunities characterising programmes and policies which are also shaped by numerous factors over which individuals have no control and may not even be aware of, Jackson (2020) concluded that the overall aim should be to assist the poor in achieving sustainable livelihoods. Further, livelihoods are dependent on the resources to which the households have direct access and control. Sustainable rural livelihoods are resilient livelihood activities able to withstand shocks and

vulnerabilities that communities and households are often subjected to (John et al., 2022).

Many scholars have ascribed increased failure in local governance to poor national governance and inadequate legislative and administrative frameworks (Nuhu, 2019; Silva-Laya, D'Angelo, García, Zúñiga, & Fernández, 2020). There is also a complete reflection of gaps between the macro and micro systems of governance (Fang, R. Zhu, C. J. Zhang, Rasul, & Neupane, 2020). However, Etana, Snelder, van Wesenbeeck, and de Cock Buning (2022) stated that the accessibility and availability of resources, opportunities, and services determine the viability and effectiveness of livelihood strategies; all of these variables may be positively or negatively influenced by institutional, social, or ecological factors. This further accentuates the importance of SLF as a key conceptual framework to analyse regional developmental reality such as external shocks (Cairney, 2019). Interestingly, Ogilvie et al. (2020), however, criticised SLF theoretical approach in analysing rural poverty, claiming it is best applied to the urban socio-economic reality. However, Franco (2020) refuted this claim stating that livelihoods are shaped by policies, institutions, and processes (PIPs) at all levels, from the local to the international spectrum. The realisation of this fact determines the interchangeability of capitals and access to vital livelihood resources. Affirming this further, Ngwenya (2021) stated that organisations in the public and private sectors both make choices, implement rules and regulations, and take activities that affect people's livelihoods. Processes control how institutions and individuals behave and interact. PIPs, which function at all levels and in all domains, both public and private, have a significant impact on the circumstances that promote the fulfilment of various livelihood strategies and sustainable livelihoods.

Largely, it must be noted that despite the myriads of studies on sustainable livelihood, few empirical findings provide insight into the role of local institutions in driving sustainable livelihood projects that are typically initiated by external partners in rural contexts. The foregoing, therefore, strengthens the central argument in this study; that is, the need to provide insight into the developmental programmes, policies, and processes from the lens of sustainable livelihood framework depicted in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** The sustainable livelihoods framework (SLF). Adapted from DFID (2019) sustainable livelihoods guidance sheets.



### 3 Research

#### 3.1 Research design

This study was grounded in a pragmatism paradigm. Using a survey design, the study sought to establish people's opinions on selected construct items developed in the context of governance theory and the sustainable livelihoods framework to fulfil the research objectives. The survey design used was according to Asemahabi (2019).

##### 3.1.1 Study area, population and sampling techniques

This study was conducted in Kabuyanda-one of the 14 sub-counties in Isingiro district. It has a population of about 21,325 and covers an area of 37.48 km<sup>2</sup>. According to the Isingiro District Local Government Development Plan 2010/11-2014/2015 (IDLGP), subsistence farming provides a living for 78.46% of the households in Isingiro district. Most individuals are subject to poverty and poor health due to the inconsistent and frequently low incomes from agricultural activities, and poor roads. Compared to other sub-counties in the district, Kabuyanda has 36.6% of its population living below the poverty line (IDLG, 2015).

Notable socioeconomic facilities serving a few local homes include a water gravity flow system and an extended hydroelectric power supply from Uganda's national grid network. Kabuyanda has no tarmac roads, and the road infrastructure is underdeveloped. In addition, due to its location in a dry belt, Kabuyanda is susceptible to drought. Water is generally scarce for home and farming purposes (Naiga, 2021) and hampers the commercial and economic growth of Kabuyanda. The recent political administration changes raised some clusters of villages to town council status and carved Kabuyanda Town Council out of the Kabuyanda sub-county. Since there is little local revenue capacity, Isingiro district and its component sub-counties, including Kabuyanda, rely heavily on transfers from the national government. A paltry 2.8% of the district's revenue comes from local sources while 95.9% comes from subsidies from the national government, and 1.3% comes from donations (IDLG, 2015).

The study population comprises 26,000 households in Kubuyanda sub-county. A sample size of 400 households was selected randomly based on the Taro Yamane (1973) sample size formula.

### **3.2 Data collection and technique of analysis**

Data was collected via the survey of the representative households in Kabuyanda district, making the sampling protocol a household-level analysis. The choice of household was informed by the need to gain insight into their experience of the governance process and relations even as a major recipient of governance outcomes. Specifically, 400 out of the 26,000 households in rural Uganda in November 2021 were selected using access controlled online data collection platform (KoboTool box). A descriptive statistic using frequency tables and graphs was used to analyse the data.

### **3.3 Ethical consideration**

The study seeks to explore the role of institutions in establishing developmental programmes their attendant impact on the livelihood, the contribution of beneficiaries to the sustainability of such programmes, and whether these projects are designed to withstand and recover from disastrous shocks like pandemics. Therefore, ethical approval was sought from the relevant Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent from the participants was obtained in written and verbal form before proceeding with the data collection process. For community entry, authorisation was obtained from the Isingiro District.

### 3.4 Data presentation

#### 3.4.1 Demographic information of respondents

The demographic information section provides information on gender, household size, location (district) and the occupation of the respondents. The gender distribution of the respondents shows that barely above half of the respondents were females (50.78%) while 48.61% were males. The age distribution of the respondents shows that most of the respondents fall between 30-39 years of age (37.69%) followed by 40-49 years (27.73%) while 16.82% were between 50-59 years. 9.03% fell between 20-29 years of age and only 6.54% are between 60-69 years. Lastly, 1.87% were over the age of 70 while less than 1% (0.31%) of the respondents were less than 20 years old. Meanwhile, the average household size of respondents is 6.47 with the house having the highest members of 6 registering a standard deviation of 2.8 across the distribution. The majority of the respondents (98.75%) are from Isingiro district and only very few are from Evelyn (0.31%), 0.93% of the respondents didn't specify their location. The respondents' major occupations include subsistence farming (40.99%), subsistence livestock (14.41%), commercial crop/livestock farming (8.11%), formal trading (7.88%), farming (5.41%), Teaching (1.35%). While 3.83% of the respondents have no occupation, 18.02% are in other occupations.

It can be seen that most respondents are workers (26%), and 18% are subsistence farmers. 13% are into teaching and business respectively, while 12% are into tailoring, 10% are office staff and 9% work with boda boda (motorcycles).

Theme One: To identify developmental programmes/projects that the government and other institutions have implemented in the study site(s) and expected impacts on people's lives

**Figure 2(a):** Support received by respondents and their families during the pandemic

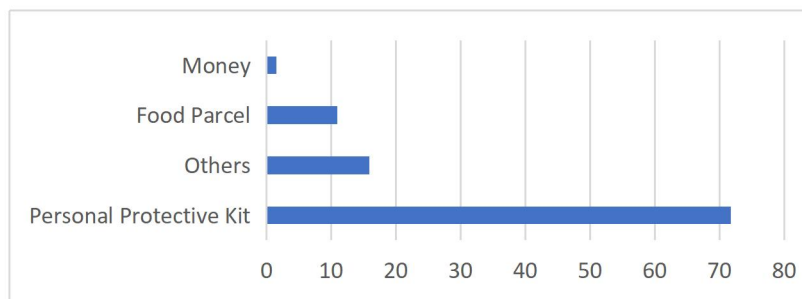
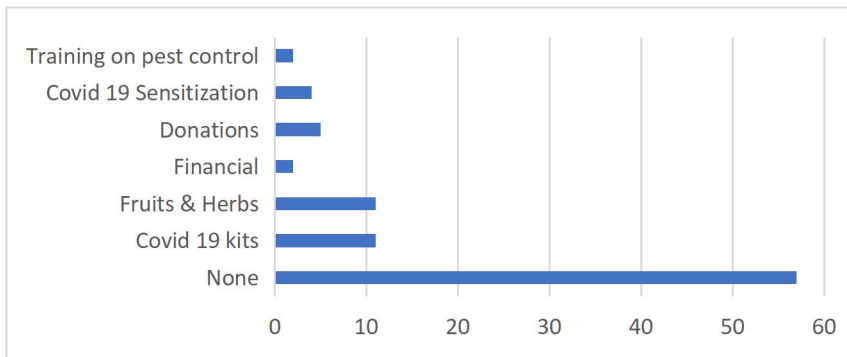


Figure 2(a) shows the kind of support the respondents and their families received during the pandemic. The most common form of support received was personal protective kits (71.65%), followed by other forms of support (15.85%), while 10.98% received food parcels and 1.52% of the respondents received money. Other forms of support are illustrated as follows.

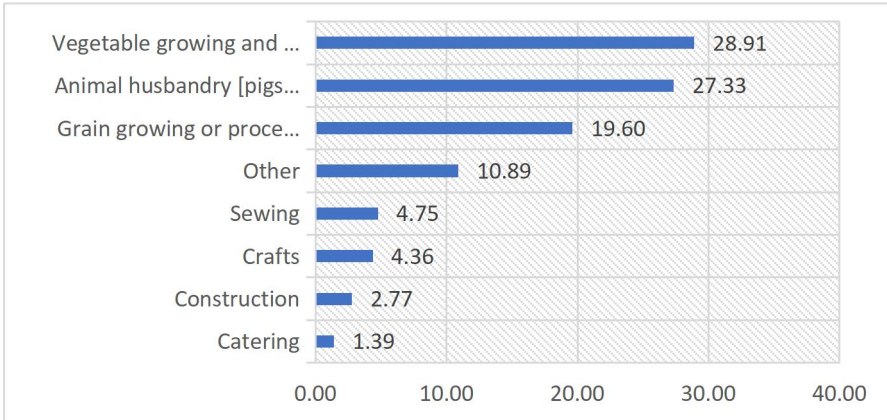
**Figure 2(b):** Other forms of support received from the following organisations during the pandemic



Source: Author's compilation (2022)

Figure 2(b) shows some other support received by the respondents from the following organisations during the pandemic in their area. It can be seen that most (57%) members in the area received no support from the organisations, 11% of the respondents received COVID-19 kits and fruits and herbs during the pandemic, and 5% received donations during the pandemic, 4% received COVID-19 sensitisation while 2% of the respondents received financial and training on pest control.

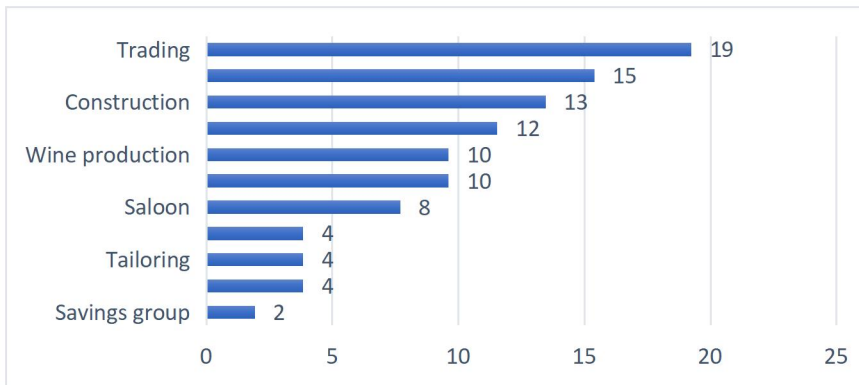
**Figure 3(a):** Initiatives by external institutions



Source: Author’s compilation (2022)

The following initiatives were brought by external institutions: vegetable growing (28.91%), animal husbandry (piggery) (27.33%), grain growing and processing (19.60%), sewing (4.75%), crafts (4.36%), construction (2.77%), catering (1.39%) and other initiatives such as soil management and planting (10.89%). Other specified initiatives are described as illustrated below.

**Figure 3(b):** Other initiatives in the community initiated by external institutions



Source: Author’s compilation (2022)

Figure 3(b) shows other initiatives in the community by external institutions, it can be seen that most respondents claimed trading (19%) to be initiated the most,

followed by boda boda riding with 15%, and construction of buildings with 13%. 12% of respondents believed workers were initiated followed by wine production (10%), and saloon (8%), 2% claimed a savings group was initiated while 10% claimed there was no initiative by an external institution.

**Figure 4(a):** Benefits of participating in the projects



Source: Author's compilation (2022)

Figure 4(a) shows the benefits of participating in various developmental projects. These developmental projects and initiatives helped respondents change their diet, as reported by 27.12%, afford household items (25.03%) and increase their ability to send their children to school (14.60%). It also increased the propensity to save money (11.90%) while helping in the payment of their group or civic membership dues (8.22%). Some were able to pay their taxes (7.98%), invest in land and buildings (1.35%) and do other things (3.80%) with the proceeds from participation in these initiatives. More benefits are specified below.

**Figure 4(b):** Other Benefits of participating in the developmental projects

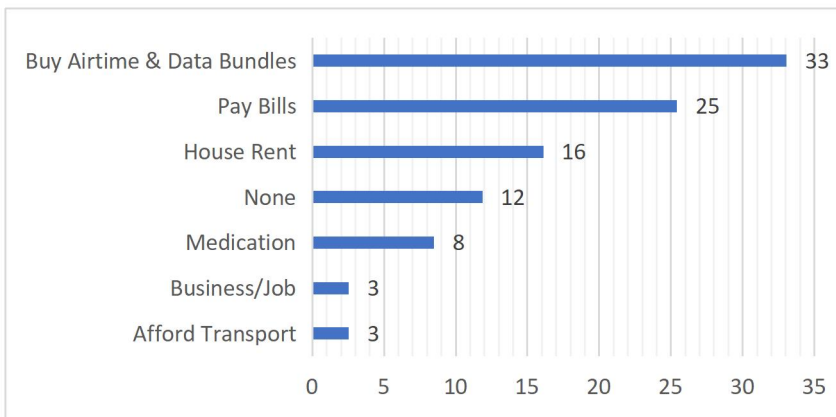
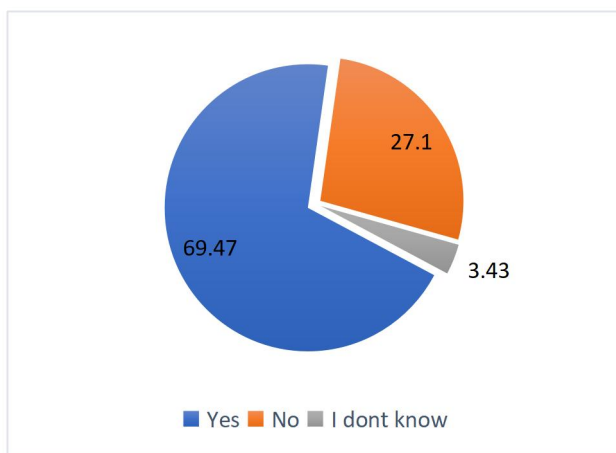


Figure 4(b) shows other benefits of respondents’ participation in the above project/s. It can be seen that most respondents were able to buy airtime and data bundle (33%), 25% were able to pay bills, 16% were able to get better housing and pay house rent. Other respondents got medication (12%), business/job (3%) and transport (3%) while 12% claimed to have benefited nothing.

**Figure 5:** Have your sources of income changed compared to pre-participation period?

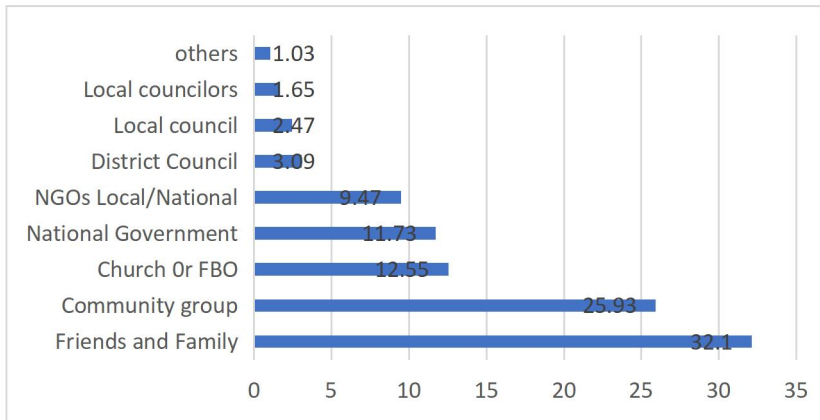


Source: Author’s compilation (2022)

In Figure 5, most of the respondents (69.71%) claimed their source of income has changed compared to pre-participation in the projects and initiatives, with only 27, 1% of the respondents experiencing no change, while 3.43% provided no response.

Theme Two: To identify the implementers of social programmes.

**Figure 6:** Implementation of community-based development projects

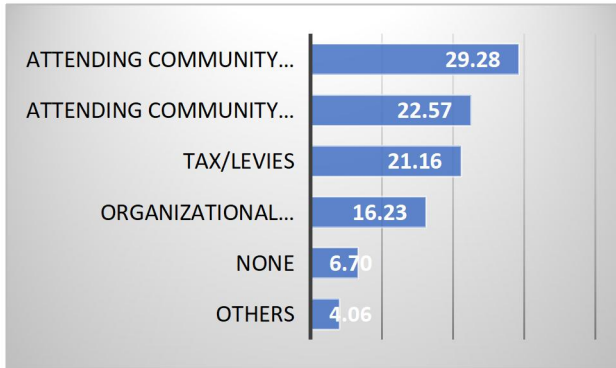


Source: Author's compilation (2022)

Figure 6 shows the community-based development projects that were implemented by family and friends (32.10%), community groups (25.93%) and churches or FBOs (12.55%). The National government powered 11.73% of the projects. Others were NGOs (9.47%), district councils (3.09%), local councils (2.47%), local councillors (1.65%) and other (1.03%) bodies.

Theme Three: The role and contribution of the beneficiaries.

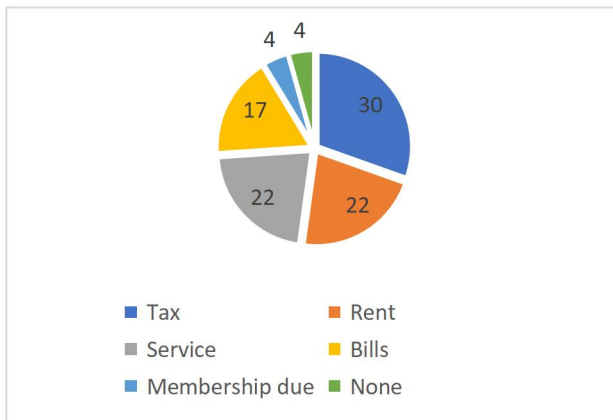
**Figure 7(a):** Contribution of households to local institutions



Source: Author’s compilation from field survey (2022)

Figure 7(a) shows various forms of contributions the residents make to their local institutions. Most of the respondents’ contribution is in the form of attending meetings (51.85%) and paying community dues (29.28%), membership dues (22.57%), pay tax and levies (21.16%), while others pay organisational membership due (16.23%). 4.06% contributed in other ways while 6.70% never contributed.

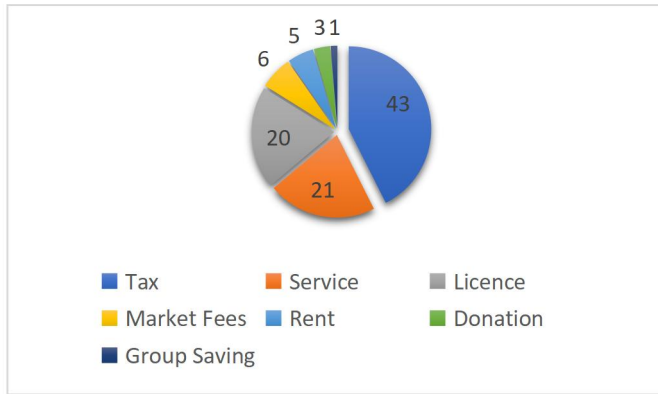
**Figure 7(b):** Other contributions made to your local institutions



Source: Author’s compilation from field survey (2022)

Figure 7(b) shows the other forms of contributions made by respondents to their local institutions in the area; 30% of the respondents paid their taxes to the local institution, 22% paid rent and offered their service, and bills were paid to the local institution by 17% of the respondents while 4% paid their membership due and others (4%) contributed nothing.

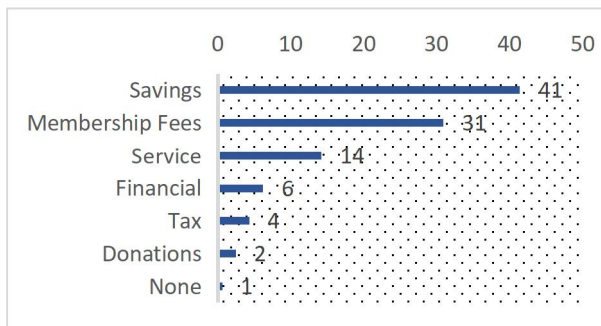
**Figure 8(a):** Other forms of contribution to the local government



Source: Author's compilation from field survey (2022)

Figure 8(a) shows other forms of contributions made by respondents to the local government. It can be seen that most of the respondents (43%) paid their taxes, followed by various services by 21% of the respondents, while 20% paid for their licence and market fees (6%), rent (5%), donation (3%), and group saving (1%).

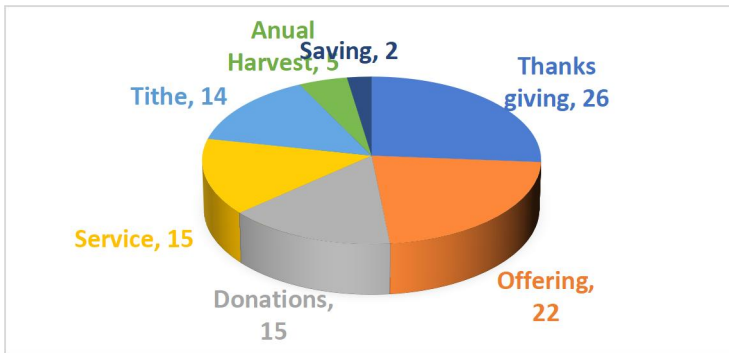
**Figure 8(b):** Other forms of contribution to civic organisation including savings club



Source: Author's compilation from field survey (2022)

Figure 8 (b) shows other forms of contributions made by respondents to civic organisations; they also belong to other savings clubs. Most respondents (41%) saved with them, followed by the payment of membership fees (31%). While 14% of the respondents contributed their service, 6% contributed financially, 4% paid their tax, 2% made donations and only 1% did not contribute anything.

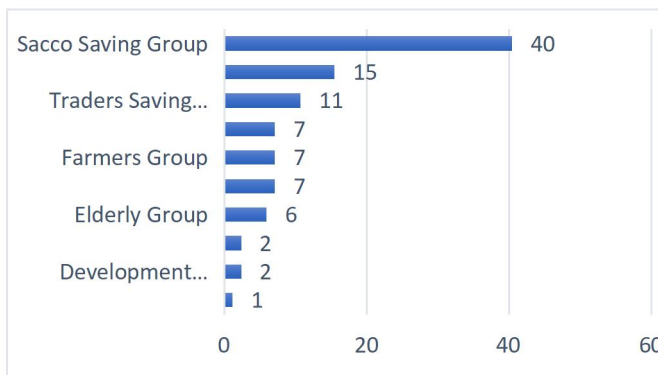
**Figure 8(c):** Other forms of contribution to faith organisations and savings clubs



Source: Author’s compilation from field survey (2022)

Figure 8 (c) shows other forms of contribution made by respondents to faith organisations and they also belong to other savings clubs. Most respondents contributed to faith organisations through thanksgiving (26%), offering (22%), donations (15%), their service (15%), tithe (14%), annual harvest (5%) and savings (2%).

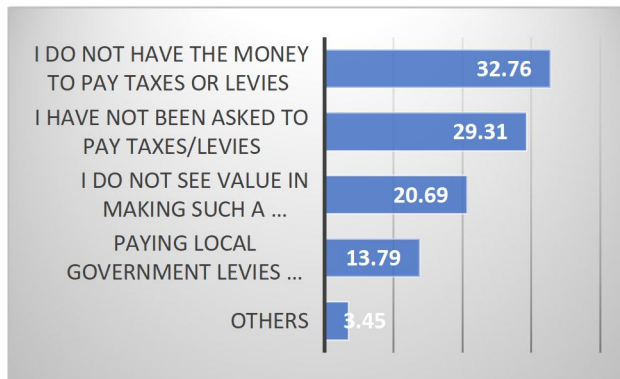
**Figure 8(d):** Other organisations to which contributions were made



Source: Author’s compilation from field survey (2022)

Figure 8(d) shows other organisations the respondents made contributions. It can be seen that 40% of respondents contributed to SACCOs, 15% to women's savings groups, 11% to traders saving groups, and 7% of the respondents contributed to youth savings groups, farmers' groups and boda boda groups respectively. 6% contributed to the elderly groups, 2% contributed to the disabled and developmental groups and 1% contributed to the orphans group.

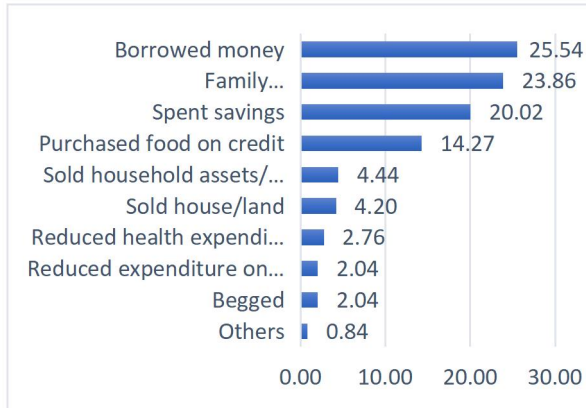
**Figure 9:** Reason respondents did not make contributions to their local government



Source: Author's compilation from a field survey in 2022

Reasons listed for no contribution include lack of money to pay for tax or levies (32.76%), 29.31% also stated they were not asked, while 20.69% said they did not see value in making such a contribution. Also, 13.79% of the respondents believed paying local government levies is not their responsibility while 3.45% mentioned other reasons (Figure 9).

## Theme Four: Effect of COVID-19 on your projects

**Figure 10:** Coping strategies

Source: Author's compilation from field survey (2022)

Figure 10 shows that, to cope with the disastrous effect COVID had on developmental programmes, most of the respondents borrowed money (25.54%). While 23.86% received help from family members, 20.02% used their savings, and 14.27% purchased food on credit. It must be noted that very few (4.44%) sold household assets while some sold houses or land (4.20%). In addition, 2.76% reduced health expenditures while 2.04% begged and (0.84%) did other things. The respondents also engaged in activities such as petty business like selling cooked food, and others also reduced their savings as coping strategies.

#### 4 Discussion

In light of the foregoing, the study observed that contrary to decentralisation promises that place a high premium on local government's ability to contribute to rural livelihood activities, the communities are more likely to receive such support from civic structures than from local government. This can be in the form of district councils, and local councillors who are the least likely to contribute to social development programmes. However, family and friends are the primary source of social support, followed by civic community groups and the church. This finding contrasts with ideals of decentralisation, which place a high premium on the local government's ability to contribute to rural livelihood activities. This finding conforms with Palmer et al. (2022) who reported that social programmes are primarily financed by friends, family, and non-governmental organisations, including faith-based ones. Similarly, Vilakati et al. (2020) confirmed that the operations of NGOs and FBOs are vastly community-based and at the rural and

semi-rural entry points, and as a result, they need to be empowered to carry out the majority of their roles adequately, and further help reduce the country's disease burden.

Also, the kind of support ranges from subsistence and commercial farming in form of animal and crop husbandry as well as service industries like saloons, motorcycle transport and hotels. This is in stark contrast to South Africa where the bulk of rural people rely on government grants (Granlund & Hochfeld, 2020).

Most individuals reported an increase in income relative to pre-participation in the programmes and initiatives. The livelihood activities undertaken have had a substantial influence on the livelihoods of people in Kabuyanda sub-county. Most of the additional income is spent on food and household items, while many families utilise it to send their children to school. The fact that just a small portion of the additional income is invested in banks or real estate indicates that the additional income is unlikely to have a sustained influence on lives. This is evidenced by the rapid shift in income and livelihoods that occurred during the epidemic (Janssens et al., 2021; John et al., 2022). This conforms with the thoughts of Islam et al. (2022) who indicated that sustainability may mean different things to different people. However, what makes a sustainable programme relevant to people's sustainable livelihood is when what unites the diverse approaches or activities is centred around the need to lessen the complexity and uncertainty that first give birth to requests for sustainable livelihoods.

With respect to the resilience of the people, coping strategies such as borrowing, support from family members, purchasing food on credit, savings spending and starting a new business were employed. The summed implication of this is that this economically disadvantaged cohort only prioritises their sustenance over higher levels of needs. Therefore, this calls for programmes and initiatives that first address this key livelihood position sustainably before introducing complex unrealistic developmental projects which only raise spec of hope without any effect.

This research demonstrates a lack of readiness for several calamities in the context of pandemics. The Kabuyanda population has become used to prolonged droughts and severe winds that damage crops and result in sporadic famines. Nothing had prepared them for the pandemic, and most development initiatives either ceased to exist or were abandoned in the face of the pandemic. This corroborates the submission of the Republic of Uganda (2019) on the prevalence of diseases and their implication for livelihoods.

Only a small percentage of community members contribute significantly to local government. Very few individuals contribute to local government through taxes and levies, with their sole contribution being their presence at meetings. While the absence of contribution to the local government is ascribed to a lack of personal income, the primary cause for non-payment is that the local government makes little attempt to collect taxes. In comparison, many respondents support faith-based organisations and the community's various membership organisations.

Considering the implications of our findings alongside other research in the field, it becomes evident that the challenges and dynamics of rural livelihoods and community resilience are not unique to Kabuyanda sub-county. Indeed, similar patterns have been observed in various contexts globally. Studies such as those by Palmer et al. (2022) and Vilakati et al. (2020) underscore the significant role of community-based organisations, faith-based groups, and NGOs in supporting rural livelihoods, aligning with our findings. Moreover, the contrast between reliance on government grants in some regions, as seen in South Africa (Granlund & Hochfeld, 2020), and the dependence on familial and community support in Kabuyanda highlights the diverse approaches to addressing rural livelihood challenges.

Internationally, the discourse surrounding decentralisation and the role of local governments in rural development echoes our findings. While local governments are often touted as central actors in decentralisation efforts, their actual contribution may fall short of expectations. This suggests a need for broader collaboration among various stakeholders, including businesses and community organisations, to achieve more effective and sustainable outcomes. Furthermore, the lack of preparedness for pandemics and other disasters, as observed in Kabuyanda, resonates with global discussions on resilience and disaster risk reduction.

## 5 Conclusion

In the context of the sustainable livelihoods framework, institutions at all levels of society play a critical role in enabling communities to access livelihood resources and recover from disasters and shocks following pandemics. With decentralisation, the key role player in many rural settings is the local government. Local government generally survives due to constitutionally mandated intergovernmental relations through which fiscal transfers from central government play out. This, however, is insufficient on its own, and collaboration with community structures and business enterprises is likely to result in more effective and durable results. This research established that a plethora of players, other than local government, contribute to rural livelihoods in a variety of ways. These organisations appear to operate in isolation and are dispersed insufficiently

to have a significant and sustainable influence on people's lives. A local organisational structure that connects such organisations and helps them coordinate their efforts is ideal, and such a system should ideally centre on the local government, whose duty is to foster social and economic growth in its jurisdiction. Additionally, the research revealed that none of the development programmes undertaken by a diverse range of players had mechanisms to protect beneficiaries during catastrophes and pandemics. In the short to medium term, making a concerted effort to mitigate, cope with, and recover from disasters is paramount.

The conclusion drawn from the research reveals a significant disparity between the ideals of decentralisation and the practical realities on the ground in Kabuyanda sub-county, Uganda. The concept of decentralisation, in theory, promotes the pivotal role of local government in strengthening the livelihoods of rural communities. However, due to rural local government institutions' limited capacity and dwindling revenue base, their influence becomes merely symbolic. Moreover, the absence of substantial financial contributions from local citizens further undermines the effectiveness of this structure. In such a complex and challenging environment, it is unsurprising that communities rely heavily on alternative support systems, including family, friends, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and faith-based organisations, particularly in times of crisis such as natural disasters and pandemics. The importance of local government in sustainable livelihoods cannot be underestimated; however, this research highlights the urgent need to cultivate a stronger collaborative relationship between local government and existing community support structures. This collaboration is essential to ensure that resilience and sustainability are not merely buzzwords but tangible and lived experiences.

Finally, local governments must diversify their funding streams. For this purpose, it is critical to rigorously enforce a culture of payment, however small, by communities and beneficiaries of development programmes. Additional research is required to discover qualitatively viable strategies to boost local government funding streams and their capacity to follow through on the promises of decentralisation. By incorporating insights from international research and acknowledging the diverse strategies employed in different contexts, we can better inform policy and development initiatives to enhance rural livelihoods and foster resilience in the face of crises.

### **5.1 Recommendations**

Through strong local institutions, recovery from pandemics will advance a more equitable, resilient, and sustainable future. This study, therefore, recommends the following in the short to medium term.

Strengthen Civic Structures by recognising the essential role of civic community groups and faith-based organisations in supporting rural livelihoods. There should be a move towards empowering these structures, providing them with training, resources, and capacity-building initiatives.

Enhance collaboration by institutionalising partnerships between local governments, NGOs, FBOs, and community groups. This collaboration will ensure that developmental efforts are synergistic and yield better outcomes for the community.

Disaster Preparedness is imperative, yet there's a significant gap in the community's preparedness for unforeseen disasters. A concerted effort must institute disaster preparedness and recovery measures, ensuring the community's resilience during crises.

Efforts should be intensified to boost local government revenue. This includes enhancing tax and levy collection mechanisms and instilling a community contribution culture. This will ensure the local government has the necessary funds to support rural livelihood projects.

Enhance the capacity of local governments to carry out decentralisation promises effectively. This can be achieved through training, resource allocation, and collaboration with experts and developmental agencies.

Establish mechanisms for continuous research and feedback collection from the community. This will ensure that projects and initiatives align with the community's evolving needs and that any shortcomings are addressed promptly.

**Ethical statement:**

This research received ethical clearance as protocol number HSSREC/00000189/2019.

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