

Engaging Communities in Uganda for Mindset Change and Community Mobilization: Appreciating the Parish Development Model (PDM) through Entrepreneurship, Savings, and Investment — A Critical Appraisal and Salvage Strategy

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Abstract:

Poverty remains a persistent challenge in Uganda, with significant disparities between rural and urban areas. According to the 2021/2022 Uganda National Household Survey, 39% of Ugandans continue to live in subsistence economies, with rural poverty at 25%, compared to just 10% in urban areas (UBOS, 2022). The Parish Development Model (PDM), designed to decentralize economic empowerment by organizing communities into functional economic units at the parish level, aims to address these disparities (Mugisha & Onyango, 2023). However, its early implementation has faced challenges, including elite capture, inadequate mindset change, and weak institutional coordination (Mukwaya, 2023). This paper critically examines the PDM, emphasizing the importance of transformative community mobilization and mindset shifts towards entrepreneurship to avoid the pitfalls of past supply-driven poverty interventions. Drawing on participatory development theory (Chambers, 1994) and the capability approach (Sen, 1999), it argues that poverty reduction requires both structural and behavioral changes. The paper proposes practical remedies to enhance the PDM, including investing in grassroots adult education, strengthening local governance accountability, and integrating rural livelihoods into viable value chains (World Bank, 2023). These measures can help the PDM move beyond its current limitations and foster long-term, community-driven economic development. By focusing on mindset change, accountability, and sustainable entrepreneurial pathways, the PDM has the potential to transform Uganda's rural economy and empower communities to drive their own development. The success of the PDM depends on its ability to embrace local knowledge, build trust, and support inclusive economic participation.

Key Words: Parish Development Model, Uganda, Poverty, Community Mobilization, Mindset Change, Entrepreneurship, Livelihoods, Financial Literacy, Financial Inclusion.

1. INTRODUCTION

The persistence of poverty in Uganda remains a significant development challenge. The 2021/2022 Uganda National Household Survey (UNHS) shows that 39% of Ugandans remain in the subsistence economy, with rural poverty at 25% compared to 10% in urban centers (UBOS, 2022). These disparities illustrate entrenched structural poverty reinforced by low productivity, dependence on rain-fed agriculture, and fragile market linkages (World Bank, 2023). The PDM is designed to reconfigure rural production systems by organizing communities into functional economic units at parish level — theoretically decentralizing economic empowerment closer to households (Mugisha & Onyango, 2023).

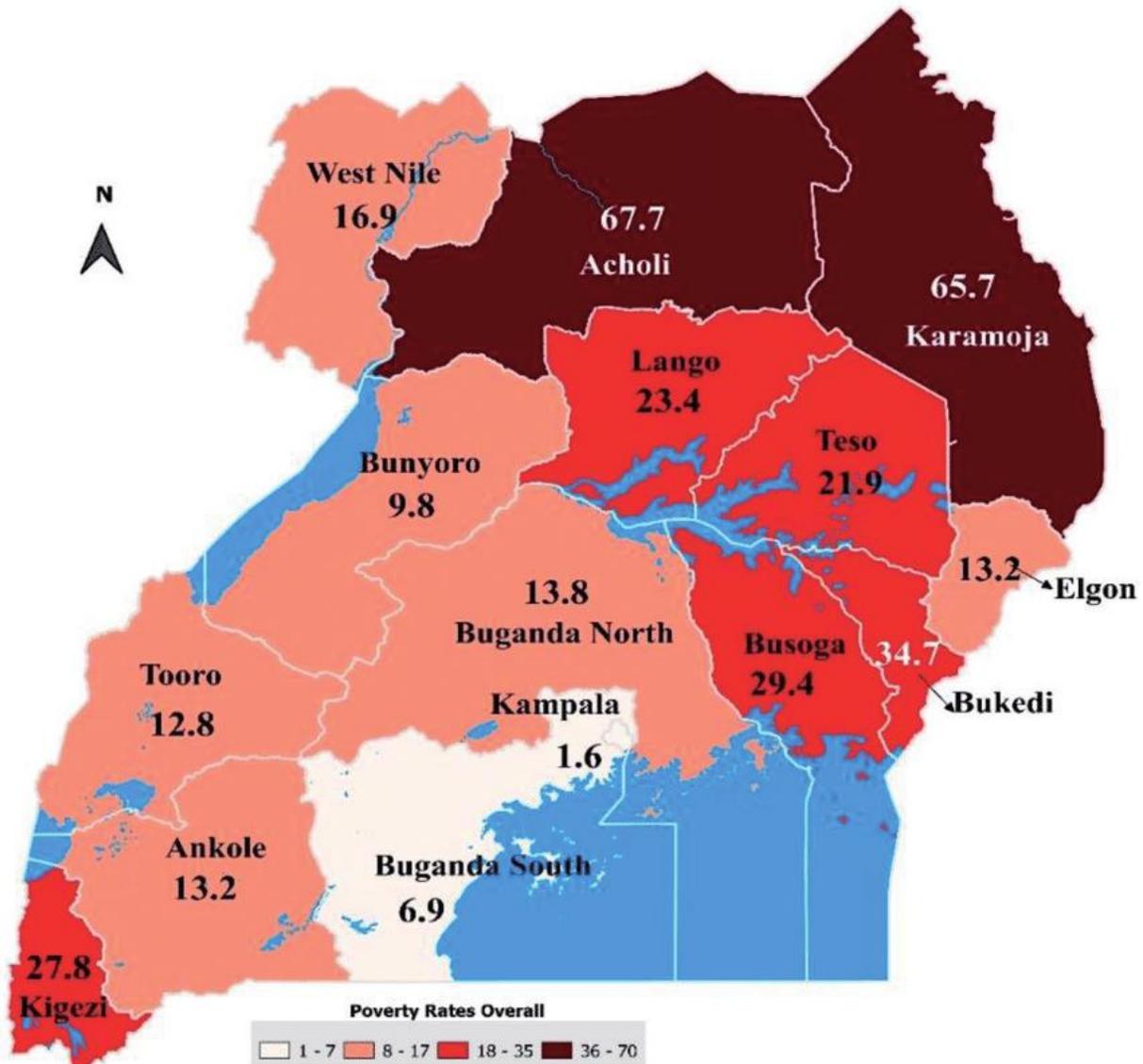


However, despite its ambitious design, early implementation of the PDM has faced bottlenecks related to elite capture, limited mindset change, and weak institutional coordination (Mukwaya, 2023).

This paper adopts a positive critical perspective, arguing that without transformative community mobilization and mindset shift towards entrepreneurial values, the PDM risks becoming another supply-driven poverty intervention. A nuanced understanding of Uganda's political economy and local livelihood strategies is vital for salvaging the model and anchoring it in practical community realities.

A strong theoretical foundation for this critique is the theory of participatory development (Chambers, 1994) and the capability approach (Sen, 1999), which emphasize human agency and local knowledge in poverty reduction. Mindset change as an element of human development remains under-theorized in Uganda's development practice. This paper therefore bridges theory and empirical realities to propose a community-centered salvage strategy.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF POVERTY AND COMMUNITY LIVELIHOODS IN UGANDA



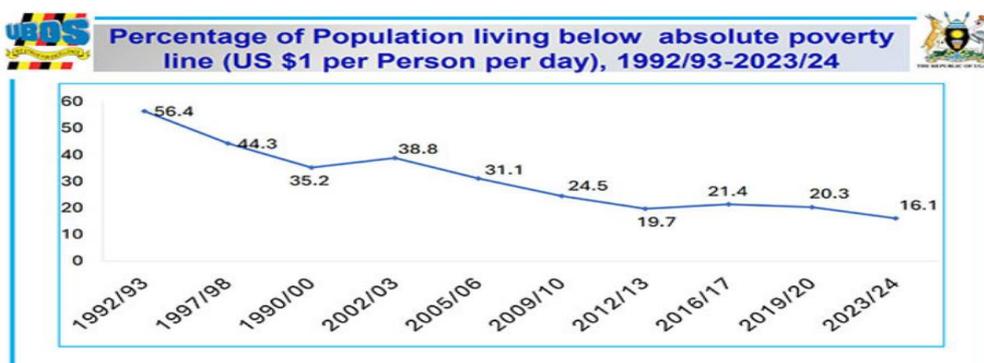
The political economy of poverty in Uganda is deeply intertwined with the country's historical context and its ongoing challenges in rural development. The Northern and Eastern regions, which register the highest poverty rates, have long suffered from marginalization, both politically and economically. The legacy of conflict in the North, compounded by limited infrastructure and inadequate access to essential services, has hindered the development of sustainable livelihoods in these areas (Green, 2008).

These regions rely heavily on subsistence farming, fishing, and remittances, with limited access to markets and formal financial services, exacerbating the cycle of poverty. Rural households often face significant barriers in accessing formal credit, technology, and markets, making it difficult to transition from informal and low-productivity activities to more sustainable and profitable commercial ventures (UBOS, 2022). Moreover, Uganda's rural communities employ a range of informal mechanisms to cope with poverty, which have emerged as critical survival strategies. Informal savings groups, such as Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs), labor exchanges, and remittances from family members working in urban areas or abroad, are commonly used to smooth consumption during difficult times (Muhumuza, 2021). These strategies offer short-term relief but do little to address the systemic challenges that perpetuate poverty. While they provide vital support during crises, they often fail to promote long-term economic resilience or facilitate significant upward mobility. Therefore, these mechanisms, while important for immediate survival, highlight the need for broader structural changes in Uganda's rural economy, particularly through improved infrastructure, access to education, and the formalization of local economic activities.

Table 1: Poverty Incidence and Livelihood Strategies by Region (UBOS, 2022)

Region	Poverty Headcount (%)	Main Livelihood Activity
Central Urban	10.3%	Salaried employment, business
Central Rural	15.7%	Farming, petty trade
Eastern	29.2%	Farming, fishing
Northern	32.5%	Farming, remittances, aid
Western	17.9%	Farming, livestock

Table 1 presents a regional breakdown of poverty incidence and livelihood strategies, highlighting the varying levels of poverty across Uganda's regions. The data reveals that the Eastern and Northern regions experience the highest poverty rates, with 29.2% and 32.5% of the population respectively living below the poverty line. In contrast, the Central Urban region has the lowest poverty headcount at 10.3%, reflecting a relatively higher level of economic activity, including salaried employment and business ventures. Central Rural and Western regions have moderate poverty rates of 15.7% and 17.9%, respectively, with livelihoods primarily centered around farming and trade activities (UBOS, 2022).



These statistics emphasize the disparity in poverty levels, particularly between rural and urban areas, and highlight the dependence on agriculture and external aid for many households, especially in the Northern region. The PDM attempts to formalize and upscale these micro survival strategies into organized savings and investment cooperatives (SACCOs) at the parish level. However, the political nature of local governance and elite brokerage threatens the model’s integrity (Mukwaya, 2023). Without robust community buy-in and an entrepreneurial mindset shift, the model risks reproducing clientelistic dependency rather than economic autonomy. Furthermore, Uganda’s youthful population (78% under 30 years) presents both an opportunity and challenge. If properly engaged through entrepreneurship and innovation, youth could drive local economic transformation. However, low skills, high informality, and limited access to finance constrain this demographic dividend (ILO, 2023).

THE PDM IN THEORY: A POSITIVE CRITIQUE

The PDM draws theoretically from participatory development, decentralization, and integrated rural development. Its seven pillars — Production, Infrastructure, Financial Inclusion, Social Services, Community Data, Governance and Mindset Change — present a holistic development framework (Government of Uganda, 2021). Theoretically, the parish becomes a nucleus for collective production and investment.

However, the implementation so far leans heavily towards top-down disbursement of funds without adequate social preparation and financial literacy training (Mugisha & Onyango, 2023). Chambers’ (1994) concept of ‘putting the last first’ remains elusive as parishes lack facilitative structures to nurture self-organization and accountability.

Moreover, the capability approach (Sen, 1999) reminds policymakers that poverty alleviation should expand people’s freedoms — to choose livelihoods, diversify income, and participate in decision-making. A mindset change pillar exists in the PDM framework but is underfunded and poorly conceptualized in practice. Behavior change communication, adult learning, and local role models have not been mainstreamed.

Another critical issue is institutional overlap and unclear roles between district, sub-county, and parish-level actors. This confusion dilutes accountability and fosters elite capture — a pattern observed in other decentralization initiatives like NAADS and Operation Wealth Creation (Francis & James, 2003). Thus, while the model is theoretically sound, it must be re-grounded in participatory local governance and behavioral economics.

PRACTICAL REMEDIES: SALVAGING THE PDM THROUGH MINDSET CHANGE AND COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION

To ensure the success and sustainability of the Parish Development Model (PDM), it is essential to implement practical strategies that address the root causes of poverty and inefficiencies in the program. One crucial remedy is to focus on mindset change, which must move beyond vague slogans to concrete adult education and behavior change initiatives. Community dialogues, led by local champions and peer learning groups, can effectively demystify complex topics such as financial literacy and the adoption of commercial farming practices (Mukwaya, 2023).

Localized media campaigns, broadcast in native languages, can further support these efforts, ensuring that even non-literate households are reached and equipped with the tools needed to transition from subsistence to market-oriented production.

Another essential aspect of the remedy is to enhance local governance for greater accountability. To curb the risks of elite capture and mismanagement of funds, clear operational guidelines for Savings and Credit Cooperative Organizations (SACCOs) must be established, alongside regular community audits and the use of citizen scorecards to hold leaders accountable (Transparency International, 2022). Ensuring that women and youth are represented in decision-making bodies, such as parish committees, is also critical for fostering inclusive and equitable community participation, enabling these vulnerable groups to actively contribute to local governance and development.

Finally, fostering community-led entrepreneurship and a culture of savings is vital for long-term economic resilience. Developing practical entrepreneurial pathways can be achieved by connecting rural parishes to regional value chains and providing support for agribusiness incubation and rural SMEs. These initiatives can help anchor the logic of savings and investment in real market opportunities (World Bank, 2023). Additionally, partnerships with microfinance institutions will complement government funding efforts by providing private credit services to small-scale entrepreneurs, thus creating a more robust financial ecosystem that drives sustainable growth and poverty reduction.

Table 2: Proposed Remedies for Salvaging the PDM

Challenge	Proposed Remedy	Lead Stakeholder
Limited Mindset Change	Adult education, local champions, radio campaigns	Ministry of ICT, Local Councils
Elite Capture	Community scorecards, SACCO audits	Office of the Auditor General
Low Entrepreneurial Linkages	Value chain development, rural SME incubation	Ministry of Trade, Private Sector

CONCLUSION

Uganda's Parish Development Model (PDM) presents a theoretically sound approach for addressing structural poverty, but its practical implementation remains fragile and requires significant refinement. The model's success hinges on shifting from top-down, supply-driven approaches to more inclusive, community-driven strategies. A critical element of this shift is mindset change, which goes beyond mere communication campaigns to form the foundation for developing a culture of entrepreneurship, savings, and investment. By investing in grassroots adult education, enhancing local governance accountability, and integrating rural livelihoods into regional value chains, the PDM can avoid repeating the failures of previous poverty programs. Policymakers must recognize that the political economy of poverty is both behavioral and structural, meaning

that effective poverty reduction demands solutions that foster trust, agency, and resilience at the community level. A successful PDM will not only provide economic opportunities but also empower communities to drive their own development in a sustainable and inclusive manner.

KEY NOTES TO TAKE

- **Mindset Change:** Must be viewed as a foundational element for developing entrepreneurship and investment cultures, not just as a communication activity.
- **Community Engagement:** Local governance structures must be re-engineered to ensure grassroots accountability and inclusive participation, particularly by women and youth.
- **Entrepreneurial Pathways:** Local livelihoods should be integrated into viable regional value chains, supported by microfinance partnerships to foster sustainable business ventures.
- **Behavioral and Structural Solutions:** Addressing poverty requires both behavioral shifts (mindset change) and structural changes (improved governance and market linkages) to build long-term resilience.
- **Avoiding Past Pitfalls:** The PDM must be adaptive to avoid the shortcomings of previous supply-driven poverty alleviation models, focusing on demand-driven, community-centered solutions.

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