


# Governance and Rural Livelihoods: Experiences From Southwestern Uganda



Betty Claire Mubangizi <sup>1</sup>  & Abel Nzabona <sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

<sup>2</sup> Centre for Basic Research - Kampala, Uganda.

## ABSTRACT

Governance plays a critical role in shaping rural development outcomes, acting both as an enabler and a constraint to sustainable livelihoods. Although rural development research in Uganda has focused mainly on financial input, less attention has been paid to institutional and governance dynamics that determine how resources are mobilised, allocated, and translated into tangible benefits for rural communities. This study contributes to the rural livelihood discourse by examining the governance structures and practices in the southwestern districts of Isingiro and Kisoro through a qualitative approach involving 34 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Guided by Institutional Theory and Network Governance Theory, the study reveals that although governance frameworks, such as those set out in Uganda's Local Government Act of 1997, formally empower sub-national units to engage in planning, budgeting, and service delivery, their implementation is significantly hindered by institutional capacity constraints, centralised fiscal control, and political interference. The findings also highlight the importance of informal governance mechanisms, such as the locally respected "L.C. Zero" structures, which operate outside the formal state architecture yet play a vital role in community-level decision-making and accountability. These insights underscore the need for governance reforms that strengthen institutional capacity, promote locally grounded accountability mechanisms, and foster collaborative networks between state and non-state actors to support resilient and inclusive rural development.

### Correspondence

Betty Claire Mubangizi  
Email:  
[Mubangizib@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:Mubangizib@ukzn.ac.za)

### Publication History

**Received:**  
24<sup>th</sup> April, 2025  
**Accepted:**  
19<sup>th</sup> June, 2025  
**Published:**  
11<sup>th</sup> July, 2025

**Keywords:** *Decentralised Governance; Institutional Capacity; Rural Livelihoods; Uganda*

## INTRODUCTION

Several studies have been conducted to understand the links between governance and rural livelihood. In Uganda, governance through decentralisation of power has been explored to determine whether it can affect rural development (*for rural livelihoods*). Kakumba has, for example, examined the participation of the citizenry in local government and links with rural development in the context of decentralisation.<sup>1</sup> The objective was to review the local governance decentralisation system and evaluate its participatory mechanisms to establish the extent to which the rural development process has been improved. The findings pointed to achievements in human development arising from the participation and representation of citizens. However, the translation of these achievements into empowerment and shared

<sup>1</sup> Umar Kakumba, "Local Government Citizen Participation and Rural Development: Reflections on Uganda's Decentralization System," *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 76, no. 1 (2010): 171–86.

benefits for the rural poor was not empirically evident. One of the observations was that some powers and functions have been devolved to local governments. Despite this milestone, there was limited support for the community's role in raising resources for local development, participating in planning, and choosing leaders without manipulation. It was also observed that the country needed participation to link to mechanisms that can boost agricultural production and increase employment and household incomes. The formulation, implementation, and monitoring of policies are key to any development, including rural development. However, although there is ample understanding of how capital and human resources can be enablers or barriers to rural development in Uganda, less is known about how governance similarly affects rural development. This study, therefore, sought to explore the influence of governance on rural livelihoods in the country's south-western region. The main objective of the study was to analyse governance processes and policy implementation systems for rural livelihoods. The specific objectives were to:

- examine the governance structure of the study areas,
- analyse the policy formulation process and community participation; and
- assess barriers to the effective implementation of rural livelihood development policies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Namara et al. studied network governance and the capacity of local governments to deliver LED in Uganda. The key objective was to understand network governance arrangements among Local Governments and their potential to improve governance capacity.<sup>2</sup> The work used an exploratory case study design to explore, describe and explain the connection between local network governance and how localities are transformed in Uganda. A local government (LG) was selected for a detailed study. A total of 30 respondents, selected purposively and for convenience, participated in the interviews. Qualitative interviews were conducted with both LG officials (district planning, human resources, finance, and community development departments) and local business owners (shopkeepers, roadside stall owners, market stall owners, hotel managers and officials from tea companies). The study found that Network governance arrangements were fundamental in improving financial autonomy and delivering some income to invest in LED activities. The study also found that network governance arrangements had not led to the development of specialised skills in regulation or law enforcement, and capacity gaps were evident amongst staff and members in understanding the private sector and how it works. A key positive aspect of governance was clear evidence of LG's attempts to be innovative. The study recommended that LGs consider a multi-pronged or multi-network governance approach to LED, which will require a refocusing of governance mechanisms to become more dynamic and responsive and offer incentives to the various actors in the development sector.

Carabine and Wilkinson, assessed how local governance systems in the United Kingdom can strengthen community resilience. Using a social-ecological systems approach, the study tirelessly attempted to explore characteristics of risk governance systems believed to be more favourable for building resilience at the community level in different country contexts. The findings indicated that rural livelihoods relied heavily on provisioning, regulating and cultural ecosystem services. Ecosystem services provide many essential livelihood assets for health and well-being, including water, fuel and food. These were believed to help strengthen household and community resilience in periods of stress and shock. Nonetheless, the relative importance of various specific ecosystem services may vary within and between communities.

A South African qualitative study has mapped the role players in rural livelihoods.<sup>3</sup> Employing the Network Governance Theory, the study analysed activities in Matatiele Local Municipality in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The results indicate that several civic and community formations operate to provide services, but in a scenario of multiple challenges, the services are spread too thin to impact livelihoods significantly. Several recommendations are made, including encouraging actors to network to promote livelihoods. Local governments are urged to partner with other state departments,

---

<sup>2</sup> Rose B Namara, Gerald Kagambirwe Karyeija, and Betty C Mubangizi, "Network Governance and Capacity of Local Governments to Deliver LED in Uganda," *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, no. 18 (2015): 82–107.

<sup>3</sup> Betty Claire Mubangizi, "Rural Livelihoods in South Africa Mapping the Role-Players," *SSRN Electronic Journal* 29, no. 4 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5254563>.

the private sector and NGOs. The study further recommends that communities dialogue with municipalities and understand responsibilities and obligations in local governance.

Karyeija and Kahika, analysed institutional roles and the implementation of local economic development. The Uganda-based study examined the relationship between institutional roles and the implementation of Local Economic Development (LED), taking Kasese, one of Uganda's districts, as a case study.<sup>4</sup> The objectives were to examine how technical, political, civil society organisations and private sector roles affect LED implementation in district local government. The study established the prevalence of a significant positive relationship between technical roles, political roles, civil society roles, and private sector roles with the implementation of LED. It was observed that the legal framework can empower local politicians to champion service delivery. However, service delivery can be hampered by unequal fiscal relations between the central and local governments. It can also be hampered by limited information sharing for participatory planning, resource mobilisation and resource allocation for development.

Mubangizi explored the delivery of public services for sustainable livelihoods in rural areas, particularly in Uganda and South Africa.<sup>5</sup> Her research highlights the complexity of these services being delivered through a network of public, civic, and private entities, especially in rural municipalities that face resource scarcity. Among others, her research concludes by emphasising the need to nurture and oversee rural service provision networks, prioritise sustainable community development, and establish enduring partnerships for rural development.

Livelihoods and the reduction of rural poverty in Uganda have been examined.<sup>6</sup> The study was anchored on the poverty eradication action plan (PEAP), a comprehensive framework for poverty reduction in the country. This study utilised data and information on rural livelihoods in three rural districts to derive policy inferences relevant to this framework. Findings indicate that rural poverty was strongly associated with a lack of land and livestock and the inability to secure non-farm alternatives to diminishing farm opportunities. Rural families encountered a rural taxation regime associated with fiscal decentralisation that was hostile to expanding monetary opportunities in rural areas.

Wheeler and Copper analysed adaptive governance on livelihood innovation for climate resilience in Uganda.<sup>7</sup> The objectives were to analyse the institutional capacities that local governments must incorporate to successfully promote policies to combat climate change and to improve sustainable development. The study indicated that adaptive governance actions incite the flexible governance of institutions in the face of uncertainty to shock. They are effective in improving livelihoods and institutional processes. It also showed that there are complex challenges to overcome in integrating multi-stakeholders.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Rural livelihoods in Sub-Saharan Africa remain intricately tied to the governance systems under which they evolve. While development interventions often focus on financial resources, infrastructure, or technical capacity, the institutional and governance arrangements that underpin these interventions are equally, if not more, significant. Governance, understood here not merely as state authority but as the totality of institutions, actors, and processes that shape decision-making and implementation, plays a defining role in determining access to resources, the efficacy of public service delivery, and, ultimately, the sustainability of rural livelihoods. In Uganda, where decentralisation has been a policy imperative for decades, the functionality of local governance systems offers a critical lens through which to assess development effectiveness.

---

<sup>4</sup> Gerald Karyeija and Giles Kahika, "Institutional Roles and the Implementation of Local Economic Development, Kasese District, Uganda," *Africa's Public Service Delivery and Performance Review* 5, no. 1 (2017): 1–9.

<sup>5</sup> Betty Claire Mubangizi, "Network Governance for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: Lessons from Rural Areas of Uganda and South Africa," *African Journal of Development Studies (Formerly AFFRIKA Journal of Politics, Economics and Society)* 14, no. 1 (March 22, 2024): 7–32, <https://doi.org/10.31920/2634-3649/2024/v14n1a1>.

<sup>6</sup> Frank Ellis and Godfrey Bahiigwa, "Livelihoods and Rural Poverty Reduction in Uganda," *World Development* 31, no. 6 (2003): 997–1013.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah J Cooper and Tim Wheeler, "Adaptive Governance: Livelihood Innovation for Climate Resilience in Uganda," *Geoforum* 65 (2015): 96–107.

This study draws on institutional theory to examine the policy architecture and operational realities of two southwestern Ugandan districts, Isingiro and Kisoro. The theory provides a valuable scaffold for exploring how formal institutional arrangements (such as those enshrined in the Local Government Act of 1997) are interpreted and enacted on the ground, particularly in rural contexts marked by resource constraints and capacity deficits. However, recognising that governance is increasingly multi-actor and multi-scalar, the study also engages Network Governance Theory to unpack the roles, relationships, and accountabilities among local government officials, civil society, and community structures. The interplay between institutional arrangements and governance networks becomes a vital space for understanding barriers and opportunities for strengthening rural livelihoods in Uganda and similar contexts across the Global South.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study was conducted in two districts of Southwestern Uganda: Isingiro and Kisoro. The specific study areas were the Kabuyanda and Nyakabande sub-counties of the Isingiro and Kisoro districts, respectively. The selected sub-counties have a high level of rurality, and their remote locations predispose them to service delivery challenges. Fieldwork was conducted between April and May 2024, involving interviews with key informants and discussions with focus groups—discussion guides prepared in advance and translated into local languages for accessibility.

The data collection team included district coordinators, field supervisors, and sub-county Research Assistants. The researchers conducted 30 one-on-one interviews with key informants selected for their expertise and involvement in local governance, rural development, and service provision. These informants included local government officials such as Sub-county Councillors, Parish Executive Committee Chairs, Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs), Local Council V (LCV) Chairpersons, District Planners (DPs), District Environment Officers (DEnvOs), and District Health Officers (DHOs). Representatives from NGOs engaged in health-related work also participated. Focus Group Discussions involved local men and women actively engaged in socio-economic activities within their sub-counties, providing diverse perspectives on community resilience and governance.

Thirty-four key informants were interviewed, and four focus group discussions (two male and two female) were conducted. Women Focus Groups comprised women market vendors, peasant farmers, local craft-makers, and community mobilisers. The male groups consisted mainly of *Boda-Bodas* (commercial motorcycle riders). Focus group discussions were organised to capture a wider range of community perspectives, involving participants from various socioeconomic backgrounds, including residents and stakeholders actively involved in rural livelihood activities. These discussions allowed for a deep dialogue about the lived experiences of rural community members and the challenges they face in accessing services and participating in livelihood strategies.

The researchers transcribed and analysed data from interviews and focus groups using thematic analysis. They identified themes to uncover recurring patterns and insights about the role of local government, service provision, and rural development strategies. The study relied on *Dedoose*, a qualitative data analysis software, which enabled systematic coding and the identification of key themes in all discussions.

The study involved collaboration with government personnel, ensuring their voluntary participation and the freedom to withdraw at any stage. Researchers prioritised confidentiality to protect respondents from potential harm due to their participation. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Makerere University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee [MAKSSREC 10.2024.717]; the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology [SS2544ES]; and the University of KwaZulu-Natal ethics committee [HSSREC/00004560/22].

## **PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS**

### **Rural Characteristics of the Study Areas**

Nyakabande and Kabuyanda sub-counties, the study areas, have relatively similar rural characteristics. The main economic activity in both areas is agriculture, with the dominant crops grown being Matooke (bananas) and Irish potatoes in Kabuyanda and Nyakabande, respectively. One key stakeholder from Kisoro District had this to say:

*“Agriculture is one of the sources from which communities here get income. There is also the rearing of cattle and poultry. In crop farming, people mainly grow Irish potatoes. Then others do banana farming and sweet potatoes; the government introduced tea growing in Nyakabande; however, very few farmers have gone for it due to the scarcity of land. Coffee growing would also be done but is limited by the scarcity of land. It also requires extension workers who are agricultural and veterinary officers. We have only one CDO going in for sensitisation exercise”.*

**KII**

Another participant had this to say:

*“Agriculture is one of the sources from which they make their income, and there is also the rearing of animals and poultry. People mostly grow Irish potatoes. Then, others do banana farming and sweet potatoes. The government had introduced tea cultivation in Nyakabande. However, very few farmers have done so due to the scarcity of land. Coffee growing would also be done, but the scarcity of land is still a limiting factor”.* **KII**

The rural economic conditions in the Nyakabande sub-county were diverse but also affected by several challenges, as one participant put it:

*“People are into gardening, quarrying, crushing stones (inkogoto) and extracting volcanic ash (insibo). There is also tailoring. Those who are into gardening grow various types of crops. However, over time, the growth of sorghum has proved untenable in some areas because birds of the air eat the crop. This is regardless of efforts to scare them using scarecrows. The birds of today are not like those of earlier times. They are not easily scared by scarecrows.”* **FGD**

In describing rurality, some participants described the geography of the area. For example, in Kisoro district, the narrative of mountains, hills and lakes was presented. It was also indicated that physical features were an asset for communities because they contributed to their well-being and livelihood. One Key participant had this to say:

*“The natural mountain provides a way for people to get firewood since they can obtain trees. The forest trees help them construct their shelters and kraals for their animals. Swamps allow children to make baskets and handicrafts, and social schools educate children to avoid ignorance. Financial banks provide loans to people, which help them do their projects and benefit from the loans.”* **FGD**

One participant had this to say about what distinguishes rural municipalities within local government frameworks in Uganda:

*“Sub-county is led by the sub-county chief (Senior Assistant Secretary) in the technical wing, and the chairperson of LCIII leads the political wing. Then, regarding services provided, the sub-county is much below the municipality's. For example, on the revenue base, the infrastructure of the county headquarters is below that of municipalities. In municipalities, people have various sources of income and good health services compared to sub-county levels. For example, the Kabuyanda sub-county people have one health assistant who is supposed to run the whole sub-county, which has 36 villages. One person cannot be enough, while in the urban centres, areas are close to each other and in sub-counties, areas are far and hard to reach.”* **KII**

Some key informants described rurality within the context of poor quality of road infrastructure, as one of them put it:

*“We have poor road networks. As an engineer, I specifically deal with infrastructure, i.e. roads, buildings and water sources. We have a challenge because the roads are poor. After all, the place is mountainous. We normally experience heavy rains, heavy runoff, and floods that destroy our roads and some houses. Swamps also normally flood, and people do not protect them. Kabuyanda is a rural area with unbuilt, grass-thatched houses, and people are in poor conditions”.* **KII**

## The Governance Structure of the Study Areas

The sub-counties are governed under Uganda's Local Government Act of 1997 and Policy. Key Informants expressed their understanding of governance structure at the national and local levels. It was pointed out that Uganda is governed by a decentralised policy where planning is participatory and begins at the lower level. Projects are conceptualised and prioritised, forwarded to a higher leadership level, and implemented when funding becomes available. The local government units were governed under the Local Government Act. Sub-county local governments were below the district in terms of hierarchy. The governance/leadership structure of the sub-counties comprised both a political and technical arm. The L.C III Chairperson heads the political arm, whereas the Sub-county Chief heads the technical wing and oversees the operations of the sub-county administration units. One Key Informant had this to say:

*“In Isingiro, because of the decentralisation policy enshrined in the Local Government Act, some authority and services were decentralised to Local Governments. We have more than two levels of government: higher local government, which consists of districts and cities, and a lower local government, which includes town councils, sub-counties, and divisions. So Kabuyanda falls under a Lower Local Government. They have the authority and powers to plan, budget and collect revenue, but they do not work independently; rather, they have to work hand in hand with the district and the ministries. At their level, they have an administration which a sub-county chief heads”.* **KII**

Another participant explained:

*“Uganda is ruled by a decentralised policy, which means bottom-up planning, which is participatory planning; when planning is at a lower level, they prioritise the projects, are forwarded to a higher level of leadership, and are implemented when they get funding. This is done through councils, mainly from village councils to higher-level councils in the district; when priorities are passed, they are put in the budget and work plans. The major role is to pass the budget and implement work plans based on a 5-year development plan linked to the national development plan”.* **KII**

Another Key Informant expressed a similar view:

*“The sub-county has two arms, the executive and the legislature arms, but under the executive, we also have the technical arm headed by the sub-county chief. There is a political arm where LCIII and his or her local ministers are, but we call them secretaries because they also head political departments. Then, the other arms of the legislature have parliament/ councils that approve anything, meaning that you cannot do anything without their approval. So, they have powers like that of parliament but at a lower level”.* **KII**

Respondents indicated that the structure of towns differed slightly from that of sub-counties. One Key Informant had this to say:

*“This is an urban town council, and it differs from a municipality regarding leadership. We have a technical team and a political wing. We are being led by the district on the technical team, whereby we have the CAO, deputy CAO, District Engineer and Town Council Engineer. We have the political wing's LCIII/Mayor, Speaker and Councillors. Under the political wing, we have the executive branch under the mayor and some committees, that is, finance, health, and work. Councillors head all these committees”.* **KII**

However, it is important to note that although the decentralised administration system is in place, it is not fully operational. All the local revenue collected by the local government structures is remitted to the national treasury resource envelope through the Uganda Revenue Authority (URA) system. The Central Government, through the Ministry of Finance, later allocates the funds following its considerations.

Regardless of the government, respondents also noted that they have their informal structures that govern decision-making within their communities, and every community member abides by them, as stated below:

*“When we collect revenue, we send it to the consolidated fund. When the time for allocation comes at the district level, town councils get 100% of the initial amount they have put to the district, but for sub-counties, they get back 70%, and we remain with 30% of their revenue”.* **KII**

*“Financial resources: We have two types of financial resources, majorly centrally funded and locally funded resources; among the centrally funded, we have youth livelihood funds, women entrepreneurship, yoga, and PDM; Local funded resources include trade licenses, market dues, locally collected services tax, and park fees”.* **KII**

Financial, administrative, political, environmental and infrastructural challenges abound in the sub-counties. Key Informants and Focus Group Discussion participants in the two sub-counties reported similar challenges in running administrative units and delivering services to communities. The main challenge reported was inadequate funds from the Central Government to meet the needs of the gradually increasing population. One Key Informant had this to say:

*“The challenges are often there. For example, there are some late releases. This is especially true at the beginning of the financial year when designated quarterly releases to respective districts/ departments are received later than normal. There are also inadequate revenue sources because most of the funds come from the centre; with decentralisation, revenue is small. Also, the revenue base is small. Sometimes, you find that the budget is not realised because of some cuts in local revenue. For example, the estimated amount is 600 million, but the collected amount is 400 million. The 200 million shortfall affects the budget and implementation of activities. Inadequate funds are needed to facilitate political emoluments and allowances, and politicians are paid by 20% of the total local revenue. However, if the revenue is small, political differences erupt due to the inability to affect their allowances and emoluments”.* **KII**

Another Key Informant explained:

*“When you have limited resources, service delivery cannot be 100% perfect, especially regarding health, as there are many people. Yes, they bring drugs, but people take the drugs within the shortest time, and you find they are already finished. It is a challenge because drugs are not enough. When we talk of infrastructure, i.e. roads, we do not have enough money to work on all the roads, however much we try our level best, but we do not work to 100%”.* **KII**

One of the reported significant administrative/political challenges faced was corruption. The vice was said to be deeply entrenched within the administrative arrangement and had permeated the system so much that it was curtailing desired social and economic progress. As one Key Informant indicated, corruption was a major issue and was affecting the areas in diverse ways, including slowing down the implementation of local projects:

*“There is corruption right from the lowest level of governance. Bureaucracy in governance is another challenge. For example, there are several stages to reach a CAO. If you have a project, you may not go straight to the CAO or Chair LCIII, even if the project will benefit all communities. If you go to Chairman LCIII, they will say to go through the Parish Chief first. The Chief himself/herself will say, Hey, you have bypassed the CDO. Now, to obtain the signatures of all the leaders, a lot of time will have elapsed, adversely affecting the project”.* **\_FGD.**

Political and technical disharmony among leaders was yet another challenge, said to have been adversely affecting the implementation of community and sub-county projects, as one FGD participant put it:

*“Another challenge is political and technical disharmony. Political interference was seen to hamper the effective implementation of approved policies. For example, the Council can resolve that each household should have a latrine. Then, they ask the health inspector to supervise, but if a person is caught without a latrine and arrested, a politician will be approached so that he/she can intervene. The politician may plead and call for restraint, arguing that let all of us get on well now, we can arrest the culprits later. We VHT people are hated; if you report the absence of*

*hygiene structures, a politician will not approve, for he/she considers that the situation could result in reduced votes". FGD*

Another FGD participant had this to say:

*"Mushrooming churches. Some churches have suspect agendas. Churches are being conducted in bars or even replacing bars. If such reports are reported to authorities, politicians will be protective. Some will argue that "It is said in the bible that people can gather anywhere to worship God and that where two or three are gathered, God will be with them. Politicians say that people can pray from anywhere, even under a tree". FGD*

Other reported challenges included unemployment, poverty and inadequate human resources. For example, the limitations of extension workers were cited as one of the factors that hinder the extension of agricultural advisory services to rural people. Disaster reoccurrences were further pointed out as disruptive to the livelihood of the local people. For example, Kabuyanda was reported to be an area that usually faces heavy winds, which destroy people's plantations. The destruction ultimately results in adverse effects on people's livelihoods. Poor infrastructure in rural communities was also mentioned as a disruptive factor to the free movement of agricultural produce and education services. It was cited as contributing to the school dropout rates in the area, as some children who walk long distances to the nearest school on poor roads usually get frustrated and abandon school. Infrastructural challenges were rife, as some Key Informants put it:

*"We have a challenge with poor roads around because the place is mountainous. We normally experience heavy rains, heavy runoff, and floods that destroy our roads and some houses. Swamps also normally flood, and people have not protected them". KII*

*"There is no safe water because most people use running water, very few have taps in the city, and maintenance is poor. There is electricity in a few parts of Kabuyanda sub-county, town council, Ruborogota, Kikagati and Bwira". KII*

### **Policy Formulation Process and Community Participation**

The study investigated the prevalence of policies and laws, how they were formulated, and any challenges faced during their implementation. The technical and political arms of the districts and sub-counties were reportedly involved in formulating ordinances and by-laws. The technical and political arms of governance were said to participate in monitoring the policies. Participants further indicated that the sub-counties were mandated to pass ordinances and by-laws. Overall, the policy formulation was a consultative process, as one participant put it:

*"Then also, if you do not involve people, for example, in things of agriculture, it is through them that you know which crop grows well in their area. We usually do this through community dialogues where we go down to the people and ask them what we can do better. We discuss this with them to make them part of the decision-making process. We also have community development officers who are directly related to the community. They are empowered to speak, make decisions, and be involved. For example, in the case of COVID-19, something would have gone wrong if the community had not been involved. They have noble solutions to their problems because they know what happens in this community". KII*

Several other participants also elaborated:

*"Policy formulation lies within the district council, so sub-counties come up with their by-laws in consultation with the head of the department. They bring them here, and we have a committee to review them. When the by-law passes through, we go on to work on it. Then, the implementers are usually at the local government level. Parish and sub-county chiefs help us to implement and oversee the operationalisation of these policies and by-laws. However, of course, you must strongly support the political wing". KII*

*“Policies are formulated at the national level; what we formulate at the district level is called the ordinance, then at the sub-county level, they formulate a by-law. However, there is a note that this by law formulated at the sub-county must be consistent with the existing laws. So, for me, there is a policy to guide everything in government”.* **KII**

*“At the district level, we do implementation. For example, recently, we had an outbreak of anthrax, and the ministry wrote a circular that we were supposed to stop the sale of meat and the movement of cows here and there. So, the policy has already been formulated. So that at the local level, it is about implementation to ensure that no meat is sold, so the health assistants, veterinary doctors came in”.* **KII**

*“Then the monitoring is both technical and political. If the ministry has written it, you, the political figure, follow suit. The technical side will follow suit if the Permanent Secretary has written it. As the district, we may not be everywhere, but as the community structure, we request them to write a report”.* **KII**

The study investigated the state of participation by the rural community in formulating policies (by-laws and ordinances). Stakeholders reported that the community is formulating by-laws related to livelihood and decision-making processes. For example, considering the projects funded under the PDM framework, the community reportedly decided which projects to fund and which people to help.

*“Before these policies are drafted, they consult communities about the policy they will bring, so communities can give feedback. The feedback is what they use to revise policies.”* **KII**

*“We have what we call L.C. Zero structure below the L.C1, although it is not a formal structure known by the government. However, local citizens of a particular village sit and say this is what we want in our village, and everyone is obliged to abide by those rules and regulations at the L.C1 level.”* **KII**

*“They have representatives in some meetings; if it is at the district, we have representatives from sub-counties, and if it is at the sub-county, we have representatives from parishes and villages. So their decisions are also made and heard”.* **KII**

*“They do participate. Because the community holds a community dialogue led by the LC1 chairman, their views are heard and captured through this dialogue; after the dialogue, they sit in council meetings, and those views come out”* **KII**.

### **Barriers to the Implementation of Policies**

Various challenges were reported as hindrances to implementing the passed policies (by-laws and ordinances). Key among them was political interference, where the political arm curtails the technical arm in implementing the policies. Others are inadequate funding and, hence, inability to implement and monitor passed policies. The other challenges were corruption and limited technical staff to guide the rural community in policy formulation. Several participants elaborated:

*“Coordination. It is not easy to coordinate in all parts of the sub-county. For example, there is a meeting at the district, and some people are unaware. Even when there is a disaster, they have brought some items to be distributed; you find some get and others, the season has already expired, when they do not know there are free seeds to be planted”.* **KII**

*“At times, political interference and policies are developed to deter someone from practising what negatively affects the community, but politicians will come in and say, leave my people to do what they think is right. Some policies are not popularised, though they are there. The community do not own them 100% because they are not well popularised.”* **KII**

*“Challenges are there. For example, if one has stolen a goat and the by-law says the thief should be punished, you find the thief is a close relative of the one implementing the arrest. Sometimes, implementation is impaired at that level. Sometimes, some by-laws contravene the higher laws; every law should conform to those above, but you find what they are doing because they are laymen at the lower local level. They do not have a person to interpret the higher laws such that what they are doing conforms with other laws, so when it comes to implementation, there is a conflict between the by-laws and those above”.* **KII**

*“There is no budget for enforcing these policies; for example, PDM money is supposed to be paid back. However, there is no money for an officer to follow up. Corruption, because everyone wants to have something for themselves, they fail to realise that money for enforcement and keep it for themselves.”* **KII**

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Rural Characteristics**

The findings from the Nyakabande and Kabuyanda sub-counties reveal a shared rural character defined predominantly by subsistence and small-scale agriculture, which serves as the primary economic activity and source of income. Matooke and Irish potatoes are the main crops, with some households engaging in livestock rearing and poultry farming. Attempts to diversify agricultural practices, such as the introduction of tea and coffee, have been largely unsuccessful due to limited land availability, underscoring a critical land scarcity issue that constrains livelihood expansion. The shortage of agricultural extension workers further exacerbates this, limiting community access to technical knowledge and support to improve agricultural productivity.

The challenging geographical and infrastructure conditions also profoundly shape rural life in these areas. Mountainous terrain, poor road networks, and vulnerability to heavy rains and flooding hinder mobility, service delivery, and market access. Communities are often scattered and difficult to reach, making it difficult for limited technical staff, such as health and agricultural officers, to adequately serve all villages. Despite these hardships, residents find value in their natural environment, using forests, swamps, and natural features for fuel, construction, and small-scale craft production. However, the contrast in service provision and economic opportunity between rural sub-counties and urban municipalities remains stark, with rural areas lagging significantly in infrastructure, healthcare, and revenue generation capacity-deepening rural marginalisation within the local governance framework.

### **Governance Structure of the Study Areas**

Based on the findings, the governance structure in the study areas is legally anchored in Uganda’s Local Government Act and decentralisation policy, which mandates bottom-up participatory planning from village to district levels. Sub-counties operate as lower local governments within a multi-tiered hierarchy with distinct political and technical arms. The political body, led by LCIII Chairpersons and supported by secretaries and councillors, works alongside the technical administration headed by sub-county chiefs.<sup>8</sup> The respondents understood these structures and confirmed their roles in planning, budgeting, and implementation. However, actual autonomy was limited. Despite sub-counties being theoretically empowered to plan and raise revenue, most of their funds are centralised through the Uganda Revenue Authority and reallocated by the Ministry of Finance, often based on criteria disconnected from local priorities. Some Key Informants highlighted that town councils had slightly more financial autonomy than sub-counties, receiving a higher share of their collected revenue. Moreover, communities were said to operate under informal governance structures, respected at the grassroots level and influential in everyday decision-making.

Nevertheless, numerous challenges constrain the effective functioning of this governance framework. These include late disbursement of funds, narrow local revenue bases, corruption, bureaucratic bottlenecks, and political interference. Key Informants and FGD participants described a disconnect between planning and implementation, with delays and resource shortages frustrating service

---

<sup>8</sup> Michael Battle, *Desmond Tutu: A Spiritual Biography of South Africa’s Confessor* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2021).

delivery, especially in health, infrastructure, and agricultural extension services. Corruption was noted to be deeply embedded, slowing down project implementation, while conflicts between political and technical actors often compromised policy enforcement for electoral or personal gain. Environmental vulnerabilities- such as floods, landslides, and windstorms- further destabilised community livelihoods. Poor roads and limited access to safe water and electricity were additional barriers to development. These findings suggest that while institutional structures exist, their operational effectiveness is undermined by systemic governance weaknesses, limited fiscal decentralisation, and fragmented actor coordination, making a strong case for reforms that strengthen institutional capacity and networked accountability mechanisms.

### **Governance Structure of the Study Areas**

Based on the findings, the governance structure in the study areas is legally anchored in Uganda's *Local Government Act* and decentralisation policy, which mandates bottom-up participatory planning from village to district levels. Sub-counties operate as lower local governments within a multi-tiered hierarchy with distinct political and technical arms. The political body, led by LCIII Chairpersons and supported by secretaries and councillors, works alongside the technical administration headed by sub-county chiefs. The respondents understood these structures and confirmed their roles in planning, budgeting, and implementation. However, the actual autonomy was limited. Despite sub-counties being theoretically empowered to plan and raise revenue, most of their funds are centralised through the Uganda Revenue Authority and reallocated by the Ministry of Finance, often based on criteria disconnected from local priorities. Some Key Informants highlighted that town councils had slightly more financial autonomy than sub-counties, receiving a higher share of their collected revenue.

The study also uncovered informal grassroots governance mechanisms, particularly the *L.C Zero structure*, which exists below the formal L.C1 level. Though not officially recognised by the government, this structure serves as a hyper-local platform where community members gather to articulate their needs and expectations and formulate rules and norms that all residents are expected to observe. This finding underscores rural communities' adaptive capacity and agency, which often compensate for institutional gaps by creating systems more immediately responsive to their lived realities. These informal structures operate alongside the formal governance apparatus and influence local decision-making and social cohesion.

Nevertheless, numerous challenges constrain the effective functioning of this governance framework. These include late disbursement of funds, narrow local revenue bases, corruption, bureaucratic bottlenecks, and political interference. Key Informants and FGD participants described a disconnect between planning and implementation, with delays and resource shortages frustrating service delivery, especially in health, infrastructure, and agricultural extension services. Corruption was noted to be deeply embedded, slowing down project implementation, while conflicts between political and technical actors often compromised policy enforcement for electoral or personal gain. Environmental vulnerabilities- such as floods, landslides, and windstorms- further destabilised community livelihoods. Poor roads and limited access to safe water and electricity were additional barriers to development. These findings suggest that while institutional structures exist, their operational effectiveness is undermined by systemic governance weaknesses, limited fiscal decentralisation, and fragmented actor coordination. At the same time, the presence and persistence of informal mechanisms like the L.C Zero structure reflect a resilient civic culture that fills institutional voids. Together, these insights make a strong case for reforms that strengthen institutional capacity, improve alignment between formal and informal governance mechanisms, and foster networked accountability systems that are both locally grounded and structurally supported.

### **Policy Formulation Process and Community Participation**

The findings indicate the prevalence of policy formulation processes consistent with Uganda's constitution. Chapters 4 and 15 of the 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda require the state to fulfil the fundamental rights of all Ugandans to social justice and economic development by ensuring social and cultural well-being of people and equal access to education, health services, clean and safe

water, work, decent shelter, adequate clothing, food security, property rights, and ensuring a clean and safe environment.<sup>9</sup>

The findings also match the Ugandan Local Government Act. Parliament of Uganda which allows local governments to be decentralised at all levels.<sup>10</sup> This aims to ensure good governance and democratic participation in and control of decision-making by the people. The Act further provides for the political and administrative setup of local governments and the election of local councils. Article 3 of the Act provides for a system of local government based on the district as a unit under which there shall be lower local governments and administrative units. The local governments in a rural district are the district council and the sub-county councils.

The findings indicate that sub-counties were involved in passing by-laws and ordinances. In general, decentralisation is a desirable practice that can ensure ownership of established programmes that benefit communities. The devolution of powers to lower-level local governments is evident in other countries such as Tanzania, Kenya and Nigeria.<sup>11</sup>

The findings further indicate the prevalence of consultations with local communities on policy formulation. However, although communities suggest ideas for improving their livelihood, some individuals lack the technical ability to write and interpret policy documents, which are often prepared by technical people and written technically. Therefore, while a community-suggested idea could be upheld and overtly captured in a final policy document, some details and specifics could be at variance with the initial thoughts generated by local communities. This challenge has been observed elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> For example, in a study of the dynamics of public participation in local government in South Africa, argues that some marginalised groups of society, such as women, people with disabilities and people from rural areas, may be hampered by communication and thus not be effective participants. The study thus recommends establishing participation mechanisms that accommodate all kinds of people in their areas, considering the realities and disparities among vulnerable and poor people. Particular attention is drawn to measures such as providing simplified information and accommodating different languages.<sup>13</sup>

### **Barriers to Effective Implementation of Rural Livelihood Development Policies**

The implementation of policies, particularly bylaws and ordinances, faces several significant barriers in the study areas. A major constraint is political interference, where elected officials obstruct or override technical decisions, often for personal or electoral gain. This undermines the enforcement of policies designed to protect community interests. Inadequate funding is another critical issue that affects the capacity to implement and monitor policies effectively. Without dedicated budgets for enforcement or follow-up, even well-intentioned policies like those under the Parish Development Model (PDM) lack the necessary operational support. Additionally, corruption and weak coordination among local government actors lead to misallocation of resources, delayed communication, and inequitable service delivery.

Further challenges include a shortage of qualified technical personnel to support rural communities in policy interpretation and formulation. This gap contributes to inconsistencies between local by-laws and national laws, which can invalidate or complicate policy implementation. Moreover, some policies are poorly communicated or not widely known, leading to a lack of community ownership and compliance. Cultural dynamics, such as familial ties between policy implementers and offenders, hinder enforcement. These barriers, similar to those established by Mubangizi highlight the need for more

---

<sup>9</sup> Parliament of Uganda., "The Local Governments Act." (Kampala, Uganda, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Parliament of Uganda., "The Local Governments Act."

<sup>11</sup> Servacius Likwelile and P Assey, "Decentralisation and Development in Tanzania," *University of Dar Es Salaam And*, 2018; Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch, and Justin Willis, "Decentralisation in Kenya: The Governance of Governors," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 54, no. 1 (2016): 1–35; Rika Armayanti, "Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) on Qualitative Research: A Review," *REiLA: Journal of Research and Innovation in Language* 1, no. 1 (2019): 29–34.

<sup>12</sup> Wenwen An et al., "How Bricolage Drives Corporate Entrepreneurship: The Roles of Opportunity Identification and Learning Orientation," *Journal of Product Innovation Management* 35, no. 1 (2018): 49–65; C I Tshoose, "Dynamics of Public Participation in Local Government: A South African Perspective," 2015; Richard M Walker and Rhys Andrews, "Local Government Management and Performance: A Review of Evidence," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 25, no. 1 (2015): 101–33.

<sup>13</sup> Tshoose, "Dynamics of Public Participation in Local Government: A South African Perspective."

substantial institutional capacity, depoliticised governance spaces, and better resource allocation to ensure that policy intentions are translated into meaningful outcomes.<sup>14</sup>

Governance can be an enabler and a barrier to implementing rural livelihood policies. There are mechanisms through which good governance can facilitate the development and successful implementation of livelihood policies.<sup>15</sup> Notwithstanding its bright side, governance in itself can slow or even retard, policy implementation. In Uganda, the barriers to implementing policies can be at all levels of governance, from the centre to the lower levels of the governance ladder.

The findings have indicated that corruption and bureaucracy by leaders frustrate community development efforts. Individuals and communities spend a lot of time navigating through bureaucratic red tape. The time and effort to secure authorisation and clearance to engage in a local formal project can be frustrating. Individuals must contend with a corrupt environment to get a project running.

The issue of governance as a barrier to policy implementation is not unique to Southwestern Uganda in particular or to Uganda in general. Some studies indicate the prevalence of similar challenges in the other sub-regions of the country.<sup>16</sup> Corruption and mismanagement of local service delivery have also been reported outside the country.<sup>17</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study's findings illustrate that structural empowerment of local governments, as envisioned in the Local Government Act (1997), has not been matched by the requisite fiscal autonomy, institutional capabilities, or political insulation. Without these, decentralised units remain implementers of centrally dictated priorities, rather than autonomous actors shaping rural development according to local needs. Therefore, a recalibration of Uganda's decentralised governance could focus on three interconnected pillars:

1. Functional resourcing and institutional support - Local governments in Isingiro and Kisoro districts suffer from chronic underfunding and a lack of skilled personnel, undermining their ability to plan and implement rural development programs effectively. Strengthening these institutions requires long-term investments in human capital, the institutionalisation of needs-based budgeting, and predictable fiscal transfers insulated from political contingencies.
2. Bridging formal and informal governance interfaces - The prominence of informal governance structures such as the "L.C Zero" systems signals a hybrid governance reality, where state absence or inefficiency gives rise to localised, non-state decision-making authorities. These structures should not be viewed as threats to state authority but as organic accountability nodes that, if strategically engaged, can enhance social legitimacy and responsiveness in rural governance.
3. Political decentralisation and accountability - Political interference, manifested in patronage networks and centralised control over key administrative decisions, continues to erode the autonomy and credibility of local governments. Governance reform must include clearer delineations of political roles, enforceable checks on central intervention, and the strengthening of community-led oversight mechanisms such as public expenditure tracking and social audits.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined how governance structures, both formal and informal, shape rural livelihoods in Uganda's Isingiro and Kisoro districts. Although Uganda's decentralised framework, established under the Local Government Act of 1997, provides a foundation for participatory planning and local service delivery, its implementation remains hindered by weak administrative capacity, limited financial autonomy, and political interference. Formal governance institutions at sub-county and town council

---

<sup>14</sup> Mubangizi, "Network Governance for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: Lessons from Rural Areas of Uganda and South Africa."

<sup>15</sup> Christelle Auriacombe and Shikha Vyas-Doorgapersad, "Critical Considerations for the Role of Governments in the Interface between Good Governance and Sustainable Development in Developing Countries," *International Journal of EBusiness and EGovernment Studies* 11, no. 1 (2019): 1–15.

<sup>16</sup> Michael D Kaluya and Euel W Elliott, "Corruption in Uganda: A Comparative Study of Citizens' and Public Officials' Perceptions," *African Social Science Review* 9, no. 1 (2018): 4.

<sup>17</sup> Abubakar Ahmed and Mutalib Anifowose, "Corruption, Corporate Governance, and Sustainable Development Goals in Africa," *Corporate Governance: The International Journal of Business in Society* 24, no. 1 (2024): 119–38; J P Olivier De Sardan, "A Moral Economy of Corruption in Africa?," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 37, no. 1 (1999): 25–52.

levels often lack the resources and authority needed to translate policy into tangible improvements. In contrast, informal structures such as “LC Zero” committees, grassroots networks, and community dialogues play a critical role in local accountability and decision-making. This reflects a dual governance reality where informal systems compensate for formal institutional shortcomings. The study also found that geographic and infrastructural challenges, such as poor roads, mountainous terrain, and dispersed settlements, further constrain governance and service delivery. Agricultural dependency, land scarcity, and limited extension support weaken livelihoods, despite community resilience. To strengthen rural development, Uganda’s decentralisation must go beyond structural devolution to include genuine functional empowerment. This requires enhancing local capacity, reducing central interference, and formally recognising the value of informal governance mechanisms. Only through such reforms can decentralisation become a practical vehicle for inclusive, accountable, and sustainable rural development.

### Acknowledgements

This work is based on research supported wholly by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (Grant Numbers: SARCI170811259373), which funded the project through UKZN’s NRF/SARChI Chair in Sustainable Rural Livelihoods.

### Competing interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Contributions

BCM: Conceptualisation and design of the research theoretical framework; Critical review and editing; Writing and drafting; Funding acquisition. AN wrote the protocol, supervised field and desk activities and drafted the manuscript. All authors read and edited the manuscript.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahmed, Abubakar, and Mutalib Anifowose. “Corruption, Corporate Governance, and Sustainable Development Goals in Africa.” *Corporate Governance: The International Journal of Business in Society* 24, no. 1 (2024): 119–38.
- An, Wenwen, Xinglu Zhao, Zhi Cao, Jianqi Zhang, and Heng Liu. “How Bricolage Drives Corporate Entrepreneurship: The Roles of Opportunity Identification and Learning Orientation.” *Journal of Product Innovation Management* 35, no. 1 (2018): 49–65.
- Armeyanti, Rika. “Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) on Qualitative Research: A Review.” *REiLA: Journal of Research and Innovation in Language* 1, no. 1 (2019): 29–34.
- Auriacombe, Christelle, and Shikha Vyas-Doorgapersad. “Critical Considerations for the Role of Governments in the Interface between Good Governance and Sustainable Development in Developing Countries.” *International Journal of EBusiness and EGovernment Studies* 11, no. 1 (2019): 1–15.
- Battle, Michael. *Desmond Tutu: A Spiritual Biography of South Africa’s Confessor*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2021.
- Cheeseman, Nic, Gabrielle Lynch, and Justin Willis. “Decentralisation in Kenya: The Governance of Governors.” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 54, no. 1 (2016): 1–35.
- Cooper, Sarah J, and Tim Wheeler. “Adaptive Governance: Livelihood Innovation for Climate Resilience in Uganda.” *Geoforum* 65 (2015): 96–107.
- Ellis, Frank, and Godfrey Bahigwa. “Livelihoods and Rural Poverty Reduction in Uganda.” *World Development* 31, no. 6 (2003): 997–1013.
- Kakumba, Umar. “Local Government Citizen Participation and Rural Development: Reflections on Uganda’s Decentralization System.” *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 76, no. 1 (2010): 171–86.
- Kaluya, Michael D, and Euel W Elliott. “Corruption in Uganda: A Comparative Study of Citizens’ and Public Officials’ Perceptions.” *African Social Science Review* 9, no. 1 (2018): 4.
- Karyeija, Gerald, and Giles Kahika. “Institutional Roles and the Implementation of Local Economic Development, Kasese District, Uganda.” *Africa’s Public Service Delivery and Performance*

*Review* 5, no. 1 (2017): 1–9.

Likwelile, Servacius, and P Assey. “Decentralisation and Development in Tanzania.” *University of Dar Es Salaam And*, 2018.

Mubangizi, Betty Claire. “Network Governance for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: Lessons from Rural Areas of Uganda and South Africa.” *African Journal of Development Studies (Formerly AFFRIKA Journal of Politics, Economics and Society)* 14, no. 1 (March 22, 2024): 7–32.

<https://doi.org/10.31920/2634-3649/2024/v14n1a1>.

———. “Rural Livelihoods in South Africa Mapping the Role-Players.” *SSRN Electronic Journal* 29, no. 4 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5254563>.

Namara, Rose B, Gerald Kagambirwe Karyeija, and Betty C Mubangizi. “Network Governance and Capacity of Local Governments to Deliver LED in Uganda.” *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, no. 18 (2015): 82–107.

Parliament of Uganda. “The Local Governments Act.” Kampala, Uganda, 1997.

Sardan, J P Olivier De. “A Moral Economy of Corruption in Africa?” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 37, no. 1 (1999): 25–52.

Tshoose, C I. “Dynamics of Public Participation in Local Government: A South African Perspective,” 2015.

Walker, Richard M, and Rhys Andrews. “Local Government Management and Performance: A Review of Evidence.” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 25, no. 1 (2015): 101–33.

## **ABOUT AUTHORS**

Prof. Betty Claire Mubangizi holds a Doctor of Public Administration and is a full Professor in Public Administration. Recognised as a rated and established researcher by South Africa’s National Research Foundation, she occupies the NRF/Research Chair in Sustainable Rural Livelihoods at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Prof. Mubangizi is the Editor of the *African Journal of Governance and Development* and a member of the International Steering Committee ICSD Conference in Rome.

Dr. Abel Nzabona Abel Nzabona (PhD) is a Professional Demographer with research interests in Migration, Environment, Population Ageing and Population Dynamics. He has taught demography-related courses at Makerere University from 2000-2021 and published several journal articles on ageing, migration and environment. He is an Instructor of Research and Report Writing skills at the Centre for Basic Research and belongs to professional organisations such as IUSSP, UAPS and UGA.