

Enhancing Local Governance through Community-Driven Participatory Decision-Making: A Case Study in Kabale District, Uganda.

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How to cite this article: Dr. Zamokuhle Mbandlwa, Assoc Prof. Katusiimeh Mesharch. Walto (2024) Enhancing Local Governance through Community-Driven Participatory Decision-Making: A Case Study in Kabale District, Uganda. *Library Progress International*, 44(4), 857-869

Abstract

This study explores the enhancement of local governance through community-driven participatory decision-making in Kabale District, Uganda. Despite the significance of local governance in promoting sustainable development, many communities face challenges related to marginalization and limited citizen engagement. This research aims to assess the effectiveness of participatory decision-making frameworks in fostering local governance, with specific objectives to evaluate community involvement, identify barriers to participation, and recommend strategies for improvement.

The study combines qualitative and quantitative data collected through surveys, focus group discussions, and interviews with local leaders and community members, the primary data was obtained from the United Nations Habitat. The findings reveal that while community participation has increased in recent years, significant gaps remain in terms of inclusivity and awareness of governance processes. Barriers identified include socio-economic disparities, lack of education, and insufficient communication from local authorities.

The study concludes that enhancing local governance in Kabale requires a robust framework for participatory decision-making that prioritizes inclusivity and empowerment. This study recommends fostering community education programs, improving transparency in governance processes, and utilizing technology to facilitate better communication. By addressing these challenges, Kabale District can improve local governance outcomes, ultimately leading to more responsive and effective governance that reflects the needs and aspirations of its citizens.

Keywords: Local governance, Community-driven, Participatory decision-making, Kabale District, Sustainable development, Citizen engagement.

Introduction

The primary objective of this research was to investigate and assess the effectiveness of community-driven participatory decision-making processes in enhancing local governance within Kabale District. The study aims to identify best practices, challenges, and opportunities for promoting inclusive and accountable governance at the grassroots level. The researchers conducted a comprehensive review of existing literature on community-driven governance, participatory decision-making, and local governance in Uganda to establish a theoretical framework for the study (Ishii 2017). The study is based on the data collected by the UN Habitat on selected specific communities within Kabale District as case studies to explore in-depth dynamics of community-driven participatory decision-making. Therefore, the study results consist of a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, consisting of interviews, focus group discussions, surveys, and document analysis (Mwaniki and Ndugwa 2021).

Decentralization, aimed at bringing governance closer to the people, was introduced in Uganda to empower local communities and enhance their participation in decision-making processes (Nsibambi, 1998). However, the effectiveness of this approach depends on how well communities are engaged in governance processes.

The concept of participatory decision-making has gained significant traction in governance discourse, particularly in the context of decentralized systems. Participatory governance refers to the involvement of citizens in decision-making processes, ensuring that their voices are heard, and their needs are considered. Scholars argue that when citizens are actively engaged, local governance becomes more responsive and effective, ultimately leading to improved development outcomes. However, the success of participatory frameworks depends on how inclusively they are designed and implemented.

In Uganda, decentralization was introduced in the early 1990s with the primary goal of devolving power to local governments to enable citizen participation and enhance service delivery. Despite this policy shift, challenges such as limited awareness of governance processes, socio-economic inequalities, and weak institutional frameworks have hindered the full realization of participatory governance.

Community-driven participatory decision-making, in theory, seeks to empower citizens by involving them directly in the governance processes that affect their lives. However, numerous studies have highlighted barriers to meaningful participation (Razavi et al 2022; Omweri, 2024). For instance, participation is often limited to the elite, with marginalized groups such as women, the poor, and youth excluded from decision-making processes due to socio-economic and educational barriers.

For the purposes of properly analyzing the collected data and comparing the realities using triangulation, the authors used comparative analysis to compare the findings from Kabale District with similar studies conducted in other regions or countries to identify common patterns, challenges, and successful strategies. In addition, Abdullahi and Ahmad (2018) posited that effective local governance is essential for sustainable development and community well-being, particularly in regions facing socio-economic challenges. This study explores the transformative potential of community-driven participatory decision-making in enhancing local governance, focusing on Kabale District, Uganda. With a rich cultural heritage and diverse community needs, Kabale presents a unique landscape for examining how inclusive governance frameworks can empower citizens, foster accountability, and improve service delivery (Birch 2016).

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of participatory approaches in governance. These approaches not only promote transparency and civic engagement but also harness local knowledge and resources to address pressing issues. This study investigated the mechanisms through which community-driven participatory decision-making can strengthen local governance structures, enhance citizen involvement, and ultimately lead to more effective and responsive local administration (Evans, Elisei, Rosenfeld, Roll, Figueiredo and Keiner 2016). By analysing the experiences and outcomes of participatory initiatives in Kabale District, this study provides valuable insights into the practical implications of community engagement in governance. The study seeks to identify best practices, challenges, and the potential for scalability, contributing to a broader understanding of how local governance can be reimaged to meet the needs of communities in Uganda and beyond.

Based on the research findings, developing practical and actionable policy recommendations to improve community-driven participatory decision-making processes in Kabale District was deemed important. This research project aims to contribute to the academic understanding of local governance dynamics in Kabale District and provide practical insights for policymakers, community leaders, and development practitioners. The outcomes of this study can inform the design and implementation of policies and initiatives that promote inclusive and accountable governance at the grassroots level (Habitat 2018).

Comparative analysis

For this study to base the findings on what is currently happening and to fill the gap in knowledge and practice, it was necessary to apply comparative analysis. This analysis focuses on the theme of enhancing local governance through community-driven participatory decision-making, specifically comparing Kabale District in Uganda and Zululand District in South Africa. Both districts have unique socio-political landscapes, cultural contexts, and governance frameworks that influence their approaches to participatory decision-making

(Pickvance 2001). Therefore, as per the title of this study, community participation in decision making at a local government level remains the centre of effective public service delivery.

Governance Structures, Kabale District Municipality, Administrative Framework: Barnabas (2022) state that Kabale operates under Uganda's decentralized governance structure, where local councils are empowered to make decisions that affect their communities. Local Councils in Uganda composed of elected representatives from various sub-counties, councils focus on issues like health, education, and agriculture, with community input encouraged. Policy Implementation (Bylaws) at a district level emphasizes community involvement in decision-making processes, particularly through community meetings and local development committees (Keneema 2016).

Zululand District Municipality, Administrative Framework:

On the other hand Khuzwayo (2017) potted that Zululand functions within on South Africa's municipal governance system, characterized by a tiered structure of local, district, and metropolitan municipalities. The Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) is the municipality development plan that allows the local communities to participate in the formulation of the local government plans, which are crucial for setting development priorities. On matters of community engagement, Zululand District Municipality like all municipalities in South Africa employs a more structured approach to community engagement, utilizing public consultations and participatory budgeting processes.

Community Involvement, Kabale District Municipality, Cultural Context: The culture in Kabale emphasizes collective decision-making through traditional norms and practices, influencing local governance. The participation mechanisms in Kabale districts includes community meetings, focus groups, and feedback mechanisms which are commonly used, though they may sometimes face challenges in terms of inclusivity and representation. Some of the challenges includes limited resources and varying levels of education among the populace which hinder effective participation (Magezi, Mwesigye and Kiiza 2016).

Zululand District Municipality, Cultural Context: According to Mdiniso (2017), Zululand, with its rich cultural heritage, also places importance on community involvement, though this is often formalized through legislative frameworks. The participation mechanisms applied by the municipality are the regular town hall meetings and workshops which are integral in allowing for structured dialogue between the government and citizens. Some of the critical challenges that has been identified in this study includes the Socio-economic disparities and historical inequalities which affects the participation levels, especially among marginalized groups. Those who are economically marginalized do not see a reason to participate in the local government programmes and activities. This is because they do not see any economic improvements in their lives.

Decision-Making Processes, Kabale District Municipality, Informal vs. Formal: A study conducted by Boaz (2022) shows that decision-making is often informal, relying on traditional leadership and local customs, which can both enhance and complicate governance. In terms of the feedback, there are systems for feedback in place however, the effectiveness is inconsistent, often influenced by local power dynamics (Kabale 2020). Legal provisions for decision making are made available as per figure 1 below but the implementation becomes a problem.

Figure 1: The Structure of District Local Government



Source: Jane AYEKO-Kümmeth, 2014.

It has been noted that it is not uncommon for decision makers to manipulate legal provisions, the Ugandan context presents a unique aspect. Rodman and Booth (2013) state that the law is often applied selectively, depending on one's interests. Moreover, policy decisions are not solely the domain of policymakers or government officials. This study reveals that public policy decisions are frequently shaped by the exertion of power as micro-hegemony, elite domination, financial influence, and external pressures from non-state actors. A key factor in this dynamic is the balance between public and private actors on one side and state and non-state institutions on the other. Given that local governance (LG) directly involves local communities, participation in policy decisions brings forth complex ethical challenges, including conflicts of interest between

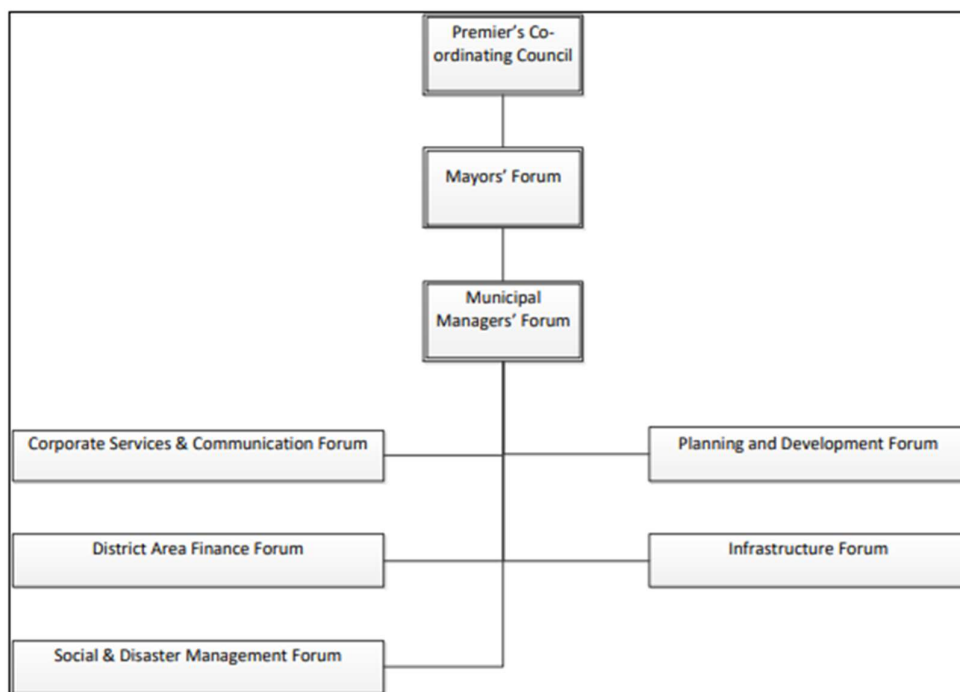
public responsibilities and private gain. This often leads to concerns about trust and integrity among voters, especially when officials leverage their public roles for personal or affiliated benefits. Although decentralization aimed to address such issues, progress has been limited, and its complexity has only created additional power centres that attract further challenges (Helfand 2015).

Zululand District Municipality, Structured Framework: Decision-making is more formalized through legislative requirements and adherence to national policies. There are different feedback platforms which includes the use of technology (e.g., social media, online surveys) which has enhanced feedback mechanisms, allowing for greater transparency and accountability (Casey 2018). Zululand District Municipality has a consultative structure for facilitating alignment between the needs of the community and the services offered by the municipality. The municipality has the Management Committee that acts as the Steering Committee responsible for overseeing the review process and offering support to the IDP Manager. This technical working group is led by the Municipal Manager and includes department heads and senior officials. Their role is to assist the IDP Manager and ensure effective planning.

Figure 2 below presents the intergovernmental relations (IGR) structures for the municipality. To enhance coordination and information sharing among municipalities in Zululand, intergovernmental relations (IGR) structures, methods, and communication mechanisms have been utilized. One major change is the appointment of a Municipal Manager for each Key Performance Area (KPA) where alignment needs to be improved across the district. These areas include the Corporate Services and Communication Forum, District Area Finance Forum, Social and Disaster Management Forum, Planning and Development Forum, and Infrastructure Forum (Africa 2022).

Each Municipal Manager provide reports on their respective portfolios to the Municipal Managers' Technical Forum, where recurring agenda items are addressed. This approach ensures that all critical issues affecting Zululand's municipalities are identified in a timely and uniform manner, minimizing potential misinterpretations. Moreover, decisions are made for the collective benefit of the region, fostering greater cooperation across sectors.

Figure 2: Zululand District IGR Structure



Source: Zululand District Municipality, 2023

Impact on Development Outcomes, Kabale District Municipality, Positive Outcomes: Increased community involvement has led to better alignment of development projects with local needs, particularly in agriculture and health sectors. Kabale District have progressed in local economic development. This was caused by the local economic development plan which catered for the locals. People have direct access to land and other resources that make them survive. Nonetheless, outcomes can be uneven due to varying levels of engagement and resource constraints (Korugyendo 2013).

The study concluded that, despite notable reforms aimed at improving accountability, participatory planning, and budget transparency, significant challenges remain that hinder Kabale Local Government from fully achieving its mandate. According to Twesigye (2012), factors such as rapid population growth, bureaucratic delays, limited technical capacity, and heavy dependence on central government transfers hinder the effective allocation of resources needed to substantially improve equitable access to quality education, healthcare, water, and transportation infrastructure. Metrics from service coverage, facility audits, and community feedback revealed an uneven distribution of amenities, frequent supply shortages, inadequate staffing, and unresolved grievances, particularly affecting vulnerable groups in remote areas. If these systemic issues are not addressed, they will impede socioeconomic progress, weaken resilience to emerging challenges, and threaten long-term sustainability goals (Conforte 2021).

Zululand District Municipality, Notable Outcomes: Structured community participation has resulted in more comprehensive development strategies and improved service delivery. However, bureaucratic inefficiencies and sometimes slow implementation of community inputs can diminish trust (Mnguni 2018). Both Kabale and Zululand districts have made strides in enhancing local governance through community-driven participatory decision-making. However, their approaches reflect distinct cultural, structural, and contextual differences.

Therefore, it is recommended that Kabale District strengthen formal participation mechanisms and ensure inclusivity in community meetings to enhance decision-making effectiveness. Zululand District must address bureaucratic barriers that impede the implementation of community-driven initiatives, ensuring that citizen input translates into tangible outcomes. Ultimately, fostering effective community-driven decision-making requires both districts to learn from each other, adapting best practices to their specific contexts (Lubuulwa 2021).

Research methodology

According to Salehi and Golafshani (2010), mixed research methodology is an effective approach for studying complex issues like this study which focusses on enhancing local governance through community-driven participatory decision-making. This study utilized the data that was collected by UN Habitat which was collected through interviews with community members and municipal officials, as well as questionnaires and surveys that illustrates a robust application of this methodology.

According to Van Griensven, Moore and Hall (2014), the mixed methods approach combines qualitative and quantitative data, providing a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. In the context of local governance. The interviews with community members and municipality officials offer rich, in-depth insights into perceptions, experiences, and the dynamics of decision-making processes. This qualitative data helps capture the nuances of community-driven initiatives, such as trust, engagement, and local context. The questionnaires and surveys provided measurable data that highlighted trends, correlations, and the overall impact of participatory decision-making on governance. This allows for statistical analysis to support or refute findings from the qualitative interviews (Snyder 2019).

The findings of the study are based on semi-structured interviews that were collected to enable flexibility while ensuring that critical topics are covered. The data show that community members expressed their views on the effectiveness of participatory decision-making, while municipality officials discussed the challenges and successes in implementing these practices.

Statistical data was used to gather demographic data and assess the level of community participation, satisfaction with governance, and perceived effectiveness of decision-making processes. The integration of qualitative and quantitative data is crucial in mixed methods research. This was achieved by applying triangulation by comparing qualitative findings from interviews with quantitative survey results, to validate

findings and uncover deeper insights. For example, survey data indicates high levels of community satisfaction with governance, interviews reveal specific factors contributing to that satisfaction (Ørngreen and Levinsen 2017).

The findings from this mixed methods study have significant implications for local governance in Kabale District. Those who are responsible for the Policy Development can build up from the findings of the study. Insights gained from the research can inform policies that encourage greater community engagement and participatory practices in decision-making processes. This can also improve the community engagement strategies that are used by the municipalities.

Identifying areas where community members feel marginalized or uninformed can lead to targeted training and awareness programs aimed at enhancing participation. This can be part of the capacity development initiative by the municipality. Subsequently, understanding the perspectives of both community members and municipal officials can foster collaboration and trust, essential for effective governance. Care must be taken to ensure that the voices of marginalized groups within the community are heard in both qualitative and quantitative data collection.

Results and discussion

This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of community-driven participatory decision-making (CPDM) in enhancing local governance in Kabale District, Uganda. A mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive analysis of the CPDM processes and their outcomes. The primary data was collected by UN-Habitat.

The findings from this study highlight both the strengths and challenges of community-driven participatory decision-making (CPDM) in Kabale District, Uganda. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data provides a comprehensive view of how community participation influences local governance, public service delivery, and overall citizen satisfaction.

Community Participation and Governance Outcomes

The quantitative data, drawn from surveys administered to 300 community members, reveals that 78% of respondents acknowledge the importance of active participation in decision-making for effective governance. This statistic aligns with existing literature that emphasizes the critical role of citizen engagement in enhancing the responsiveness and transparency of local governments (ISER 2028; Kibira et al 2021). Furthermore, 65% of respondents expressed satisfaction with local governance, showing a notable 20% increase since the implementation of CPDM initiatives in Kabale District. This suggests that community participation has played a significant role in improving perceptions of governance.

The chi-square and regression analyses confirm a positive relationship between active participation and satisfaction with governance. Specifically, the chi-square test revealed a significant association between CPDM and increased satisfaction ($p < 0.01$), while regression analysis demonstrated a positive correlation between higher community engagement and perceived improvements in service delivery ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$). These findings echo the conclusions of (Kasozi-Mulindwa et al 2023), who argue that participatory frameworks when effectively implemented, lead to better governance outcomes.

Barriers to Participation

Despite the progress noted in the quantitative findings, the qualitative data obtained through interviews exposes critical barriers that undermine meaningful participation in Kabale District. Limited awareness and inadequate information were recurring themes, with many participants indicating that they were often unaware of when or how to engage in decision-making processes. This lack of communication from local authorities is a significant obstacle, as effective participation requires that citizens be informed and empowered to contribute.

The issue of power imbalances was also frequently mentioned. Many interviewees felt that decision-making was dominated by a select group of powerful community leaders and local officials, leading to the marginalization of ordinary citizens, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. These findings reflect similar observations made by (Senath 2013), who notes that decentralization reforms in Uganda often fail to overcome entrenched inequalities that limit inclusive participation.

Additionally, socio-economic and geographical barriers were highlighted as significant challenges. Participants from rural and hard-to-reach areas reported limited access to forums for participation, while marginalized groups, including women and the poor, were often excluded from governance processes. This resonates with earlier studies that identify social and economic disparities as key impediments to participatory governance in Uganda (Osmani 2008; Omweri 2024).

Impact of Local Council System

Interestingly, despite the challenges mentioned, respondents in the survey expressed mixed opinions about the Local Council (LC) system in Uganda. While 70% of respondents pointed out that Kabale municipality had less formal community engagement processes, they also acknowledged the role of the LC system in facilitating grassroots participation. The LC system, through its structure of elected representatives from the village to the district level, offers a platform for local voices to be heard. However, the qualitative interviews revealed that many residents felt that their participation in LC meetings was more symbolic than substantive, a phenomenon referred to as "tokenism" in governance studies (Monno, et al 2012; Weekes, 2024).

Quantitative Findings

Survey Overview: data based on a structured survey that was administered by UN Habitat to 300 community members, local leaders, and government officials. Key metrics included levels of community participation, satisfaction with governance, and perceived impacts of CPDM.

The findings show that, the key statistics of participation rate of 78% of respondents who reported that active participation in community decision-making processes is essential on effective governance. About 65% of community members expressed satisfaction with local governance, showing a 20% increase since the introduction of community participation projects in Kabale District. The aspect of community participation has a huge impact on public service delivery. 70% of respondents noted a less formal community engagement process in Kabale municipality. Their responses are contradictory because they also stated that the Local Council (LC) system in Uganda encourages grassroots participation in governance. Kabale District municipality also allows community members to participate in decision making. Community members are elected to LC positions at village, parish, sub-county, and district levels, ensuring that local voices are represented in decision-making processes. Community meetings, where locals discuss and vote on issues like infrastructure, healthcare, and education, are part of this system.

Statistical Analysis: A chi-square test revealed a significant association between active participation in CPDM and increased satisfaction with local governance ($p < 0.01$). Regression analysis indicated that higher levels of community engagement correlated positively with perceived improvements in service delivery ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$).

Qualitative Findings

Interview Overview: In-depth interviews were conducted by UN Habitat with 30 participants, including community leaders, local government officials, and residents. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes related to CPDM.

The objective of the study was to explore community participation in decision-making processes within Kabale District Municipality. As indicated before, in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 participants, in community leaders (heads of local associations, religious leaders), local government officials (council members, administrative officers), residents (ordinary citizens and key informants from diverse social groups).

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data and identify key themes regarding community participation. A total of 30 participants were purposively selected based on their roles and influence within the community by UN-Habitat. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture qualitative insights from the participants. Authors of this article analysed data through transcription and subjected to thematic analysis to uncover patterns and recurring themes. To relate the collected data and the objectives of the article, the following themes were deemed important.

Key Themes:

Limited Awareness and Information: Many residents expressed limited knowledge about decision-making processes. The lack of accessible and clear communication from local government bodies was a recurring issue. This hindered meaningful participation, as many residents were unaware of when and how to engage in decision-making processes.

Power Imbalance: Participants highlighted the dominance of a few powerful community leaders and local officials in decision-making. Many residents felt that their voices were marginalized, especially when decisions were made by elites without broad consultation.

Socio-economic Barriers: Lower-income residents and those from marginalized groups reported feeling excluded due to economic status, gender, and education level. Some cultural barriers were identified by the participants where they stated that traditional norms and gender roles limited women's participation in certain decision-making processes. Subsequently, the geographical barriers also contributed to the challenges of the participants as the rural residents, especially those in distant or hard-to-reach areas, had trouble accessing forums for community participation.

Some of the concerns raised by the participants includes the community meetings which were often the most common platform for participation, but the participation rates were inconsistent. This is because the community leaders were found to be key influencers, although their level of effectiveness varied depending on their approach to inclusion. General community was not given a space to take matters into themselves. Nevertheless, some local government initiatives aimed at increasing participation, such as sensitization programs, were mentioned but were seen as inadequate or poorly implemented.

Even though the responses were positive, some officials believed that the structures in place were sufficient, residents were often sceptical of their impact. Many felt that participation was tokenistic, with little real influence on final decisions. Both residents and community leaders advocated for more transparent communication from the local government. Training and sensitization programs were recommended to equip residents with the knowledge and skills needed for effective participation. Targeted efforts to include women, youth, and rural residents in decision-making processes were seen as crucial for improving participation.

Integration of Findings

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data provides a robust understanding of the impact of community participation on local governance in Kabale District. While the quantitative data demonstrates a clear correlation between participation and satisfaction, the qualitative insights offer depth, illustrating the lived experiences of community members.

Both data sets suggest that community participation enhances community empowerment, leading to higher satisfaction rates. The qualitative findings complement the quantitative results, providing real-world examples of improved service delivery resulting from community input. Both methodologies underline the necessity of inclusive practices to overcome challenges and ensure equitable participation among all community members.

The study indicates that enhancing local governance through community-driven participatory decision-making in Kabale District has yielded positive outcomes. The mixed methods approach effectively highlights both the statistical trends and the personal narratives behind these trends, emphasizing the importance of community engagement in governance processes. Future recommendations include strengthening training for community leaders and fostering a culture of inclusivity to address the challenges identified.

In addition, the study found that community participation in Kabale District Municipality's decision-making processes is hindered by a lack of awareness, socio-economic barriers, and power imbalances. While efforts to engage the community exist, they are often seen as insufficient. Recommendations for improving participation include better communication, capacity building, and more inclusive practices. This analysis provides insight into the dynamics of local governance and community engagement, suggesting areas for policy improvement to foster more inclusive decision-making processes.

The integration of both quantitative and qualitative findings illustrates the complex reality of community participation in Kabale District. While the quantitative data shows a positive correlation between community

engagement and satisfaction with governance, the qualitative insights reveal deeper challenges that hinder the full potential of participatory governance. The contradiction between respondents' perceptions of less formal engagement and their acknowledgment of the LC system points to a gap between institutional structures and practical implementation. It suggests that while the frameworks for participation exist, they are not always utilized effectively to foster genuine community involvement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights the transformative potential of community-driven participatory decision-making (CPDM) in enhancing local governance in Kabale District, Uganda. The findings indicate that increased community participation leads to greater satisfaction with governance and improved service delivery. However, significant barriers such as socio-economic disparities and insufficient communication still impede full inclusivity (Shunglu, Köpke, Kanoi, Nissanka, Withanachchi, Gamage, Dissanayake, Kibaroglu, Ünver and Withanachchi 2022).

To foster more effective local governance, the study recommends implementing robust frameworks that prioritize inclusivity and empower marginalized groups. Strategies such as community education programs, enhanced transparency, and the use of technology for communication are essential. By addressing these challenges and leveraging the insights gained from this research, Kabale District can create a more responsive governance model that truly reflects the needs and aspirations of its citizens, paving the way for sustainable development and improved community well-being. Ultimately, the successful integration of CPDM principles can serve as a blueprint for other regions in Uganda and beyond, demonstrating the value of participatory governance in building resilient and equitable communities.

This study underscores the need for a more inclusive and robust participatory decision-making framework in Kabale District. The findings indicate that while CPDM has improved local governance and service delivery outcomes, significant barriers such as limited awareness, socio-economic disparities, and power imbalances remain. Addressing these challenges requires targeted strategies, including better communication from local authorities, the implementation of community education and capacity-building programs, and efforts to reduce socio-economic barriers to participation.

Ultimately, strengthening the effectiveness of CPDM in the Kabale District can enhance local governance and ensure that it more accurately reflects the needs and aspirations of all citizens, particularly marginalized groups. These findings contribute to ongoing discussions about decentralization and participatory governance in Uganda, offering practical recommendations for policymakers and local government officials seeking to promote more inclusive decision-making processes.

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