

# Community Assemblies and the Implementation of Local Economic Development Policy in Uganda

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**Abstract:** The study investigated the contribution of Community Assemblies (CA) in the implementation of the Local Economic Development Policy(LED). Two of the core assemblies studied were; Barazas and Neighbourhood Assemblies in Kayonza Sub County, Kayunga district from the period 2012 –2016. The study assessed the role of Barazas in LED and the contribution of Neighbourhood Assemblies in LED. It also identified the factors affecting effectiveness of community spaces in LED. The study used a qualitative descriptive design based on interviews, observations, document and literature review carried out in the district of Kayunga in Kayonza sub-county. Findings indicated that community assemblies play a positive role in the implementation of LED, in the awareness creation, monitoring and evaluation of government programmes, citizen mobilisation, as fora for engagement and introduction of government programmes. Community assemblies were accountability and feedback sharing forums and supported identification of local problems, acted as information centres as well as informed policy changes through recommendations. However, their work was affected by lack of sustainability, politics of public policy, limited citizens' participation, conflicting policies, poor coordination, human and capital resources, institutional challenges and limited follow up on the concern raised by the citizens through these assemblies. The study recommended participatory planning, coordination, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of government programmes. Similarly, the contribution of community assemblies ought to be recognised and enhanced to realise full economic emancipation, since this is the way to go to recognise an empowered citizenry.

**Keywords:** Community Assemblies, Community projects, Local Economic Development, Neighbourhood Assemblies

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## 1. Introduction

Community Assemblies have been propounded as a new form of governance system for the realisation of Local Economic Development, (Andrea & Coelho, (2004). They encompass Neighbourhood Assemblies (NAs) and Barazas, with the objective of empowering citizens to realise full socio-economic potential (Amin, 2004). In Kenya, for instance, assemblies have enhanced the capacity of citizens to participate in the identification, planning, budgeting, implementation and monitoring of service delivery, which has enhanced ownership, sustainability of community projects and reduction of corruption risks (Christian Development and Partnership Association [CPDA], 2012; Gaventa, 2001). According to Avritzer (2002) and Fung and Wright (2003), assemblies are organized and work on the basis of social capital and use of local resources to interface between the community and the state to articulate their demands (Kearns & Turok, 2003). Much as community assemblies are in existence in Uganda, their programs are hindered by systematic and systemic bottlenecks as

evidenced by lack of coordination, conflicts, bureaucratic red tape, poor record keeping, and other institutional challenges (DENIVA, 2012; Kamugisa, 2015). As a result, citizens have not been empowered to realise their social economic potential. In fact, they have become complaining assemblies instead of working towards social economic improvement (Daily Monitor, March 2016, 13). Understanding the role, relations and benefits of Community Assemblies is imperative to appreciating the dynamics of Local Economic Development (LED).

The purpose of this study therefore, is to investigate the contribution of Community Assemblies in Local Economic Development, in Kayonza Sub County, Kayunga district. This chapter includes the background, problem statement, general and specific objectives, research questions, scope, and significance of the study, justification and definitions of concepts. The Government of Uganda has attempted to encourage LED through programs and projects such as Youth Livelihoods Programme, (YLP), Women's Entrepreneurship Fund (WEF) and

SACCO's to alleviate poverty in many parts of the country, of which Kayonza is a beneficiary. There have been capital enhancement and market accessibility (Annual Report of the Office of the Prime Minister's [OPM], 2014), where skills, knowledge and information have been decentralized to the communities through two key spaces at the community level including the Barazas (OPM, 2009) and Neighbourhood Assemblies (CEW-IT, 2012). As a result, citizens have been organised through Barazas' and NAs and benefited local economic incentives inform of seeds, farm tools including animals and cash to engage in economic activities. Some of these groups have engaged in agriculture, small scale industries, retail trade and savings and loans associations (Kayunga District Website, 2016). Barazas and Neighbourhood Assemblies have been pivotal to the development of Kayonza, in the operationalisation of the LED policy. However, the objective of spurring local economic initiatives in poverty alleviation has not been fully realised. Part of the explanation is that there is lack of market, skills, absence of profitable local initiatives, uncoordinated avenues for information sharing, chronic poverty and the general lack of interest among the citizens in enhancing economic empowerment (National Policy on Public Sector Monitoring and Evaluation, 2013; USAID SDS Programme, 2016). If the situation remains unchecked, it will lead to failures in the realisation of LED. And the implication will be increased poverty and suffering among citizens. The purpose of the study therefore was to investigate how community assemblies contribute to LED in Kayonza Sub County, Kayunga district.

## **2. Theoretical Underpinning**

The Empowerment theory advanced by (Perkins & Zimmerman, (1995) espouses the need for a realisation of the role of citizens' participation and an appreciation of local initiatives to strengthen development programmes. It is important to note that citizens shape their future, and for any efforts aimed at enhancing their capacity, citizens should be given time to conceptualise these efforts to enable them understand, relate and appreciate them. It may be difficult to impose an agenda to a community whose citizens are determined to do the contrary, therefore Empowerment theory advances the need for strong relationships with the community, active listening, understanding and working together with the community to realise their challenges and together identify issues that require attention. In many cases,

it requires staying more time within the community to appreciate their challenges to be able to find the right solutions, the development worker may also require assuming a facilitator's role. However, the Empowerment theory underrates the role of the Government planning processes for its citizens. Government may decide to introduce programmes across the country even with fewer consultations as civil servants and citizen representatives do know what the communities want. The cost incurred in consultations is also another issue that the theory undermines. With the merger resource envelope, and in growing low income states, most of the initiatives may not be introduced through consultation, meanwhile the rather Decentralisation process, such as during the development of the National Development Plan, may cater for issues of citizen empowerment and participation.

## **3. Conceptualisation**

The key concepts in the study were Barazas, NAs, factors affecting effectiveness of community assemblies as the independent variable of the study, and citizen empowerment, citizens' local initiatives and citizen participation as the dependent variable. It is conceptualised that governance, policies and programmes, capacity, mobilisation, economic, institutional factors do have a role to play in the establishment of community spaces and realisation of economic development Canzeneli, (2000). Recognition of the relationship between providers and recipients of public service, the avenues for public participation and decision making informs the ultimate provision of quality services accessible to all (Kamugisa, 2015). A tripartite partnership to have local governments, private sector and community jointly and collectively engage in identification, mobilization, management and initiation of resources at the local levels is key (Ministry of Local Government [MoLG], 2013). It is important to enhance people power to manage their local resources and establish initiatives to improve their well-being as reflected to by (Zaaier & Sara, 1993).

## **4. Contextual**

Citizens in Kayonza Sub County have engaged in the establishment of local initiatives to sustain their well-being (Kayunga District Website, 2016). Of these initiatives, are community assemblies, some have been established by local citizen's organizations and others by Government, such as

the Youth Livelihoods Programme (YLP), SACCOs, Women's Entrepreneurship Fund (WEF), Poverty Eradication Programmes, with an aim of improving the general wellbeing of the citizens as well as empowering them to start up local initiatives to salvage themselves from poverty (LED Policy, 2014). However, there is low community participation and involvement in development programmes which has also greatly affected the capacity of the citizens and the district to deliver quality social services as stated by the (USAID-SDS Programme, 2016). The area has decried the lack of ready market or alternative sources of value addition to increase the quality of the produce, impassable roads affecting transportation of goods and services, low capacity in terms of equipment (tooling), high electricity tariffs, low knowledge of processing, lack of domestic market arising out of a large subsistence production, high poverty levels and lack of household income to purchase processed commodities (Kayunga district website, 2016). As a result, there have been attempts to correct these failures through the introduction of Barazas and Neighbourhood Assemblies (CEW-IT, 2012; OPM, 2009) to address the issue of community participation and information sharing. However, according to (Daily Monitor, 2016, March 13) the assemblies have become complaining spaces. At the same time Rumanzi reported that Government officials have branded the assemblies as anti-government (Daily Monitor, 2012, September, 6), because they are said not to declare their work plans therefore; mainstreaming their contribution to LED with that of Local Governments is rather complex (Namara, Karyeija & Mubangizi, 2015). The implication is that funds invested by CSOs, Government and development partners are being wasted and the objective of poverty eradication may not be realised (Amin, 2004; Kamugisa, 2015). It is on the basis of such back ground that, this research will find out the contribution of Community Assemblies in Local Economic Development in Kayonza Sub County, Kayunga District.

## 5. Research Methods

The study adopted a descriptive qualitative study design. This is because, descriptive studies provide information about naturally occurring behaviours, attitudes, demonstrates associations and one time interactions with groups of people (Bickman & Rog, 1998). A descriptive study is one in which information is collected without changing the environment

(i.e. nothing is manipulated). Bickman and Rog (1998) add that descriptive studies can answer questions such as "what is" or "what was". The study relied on interviews, observations and Focus Group Discussions in describing the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). The research adopted qualitative methods for data collection including; Interview, Focus Group Discussions and Observations.

### 5.1 Interviewing

An interview guide was used to ensure consistency and uniformity. As Turner (2010) observes, sometimes interviewees got off topic with certain questions either due to misunderstanding of the question itself or not wishing to answer the question directly. The researcher explored reconstructing questions to make them clearer. This served to reduce misunderstanding and misinterpretation of questions as Creswell (2007) states. Key Informant Interviews helped to gather vast information from many respondents; their information informed the study by providing insights and experiences to the real problem as well as identified measures to address the challenges thereof, the Center for Health Policy Research (2010). These were used to conduct in-depth interviews with Government officials and CSOs that had an idea on the variables.

### 5.2 Focus Group Discussions

The researcher conducted two FGDs in two NAs using FGD guiding questions. This was applied on NAs as local initiatives. The researcher purposively picked 10 members from each NA to make 20 respondents. The FGDs were held separately and results were compared to check whether they give common responses on discussion themes. They helped to generate deeper thoughts and insights about the study variables (Amin, 2005; Cresswell, 2004). The FGD comprised a total of 10 respondents in the selected NAs (Cresswell, 2004; Sekeran, 2003).

### 5.3 Observation

This method was applied on the initiatives such as nature of trade, farming, and other economic activities as well as the way of life established by the citizens in Kayonza in comparison with the programmes and assemblies they engaged in. This is the active acquisition of information from a primary source, conducted in an open and free manner Kawulich & Barbara (2005). Observation provided

a straight and easy reach to the study phenomena, enhanced flexibility in applying the research objectives to the study. Scholars, such as Bogdan & Biklen (1998:35), state that "qualitative researchers try to interact with their subjects in a natural, unobtrusive, and non-threatening manner".

## **6. Findings and Analysis**

The study was grounded on the contribution of community assemblies as the independent variable and Local Economic Development as the dependent variable in the study of community as was be put on the formation, composition, nature of activities, governance structure, institutional capacity, citizen participation, capacity of members, the legal framework within these assemblies. The purpose of the study was to; investigate the contributions of community assemblies to Local Economic Development in Kayonza Sub County, Kayunga district, and the specific objectives were to; assess the role of Barazas in LED in Kayonza Sub County, Kayunga district; analyse the role of NAs in LED in Kayonza Sub County, Kayunga district; and to; establish the factors affecting effectiveness of community assemblies in LED in Kayonza Sub County, Kayunga district.

The study was grounded on three specific objectives with a focus on assessing the role of Barazas in LED. Literature found out that Barazas are foras for feedback, information sharing, planning and monitoring of social and economic programs (OPM, 2016), they are used to demand respect, engagement and cooperation with actors (Anne, 2004), and enhancing citizen participation in the decision making processes (The administrator, 2008). The findings were that; Barazas are relief assemblies; are avenues for reinforcement of policy change and ultimate economic development. Citizens are able to raise their problems looking at the officials whom they demand for feedback instantly and it is given. At a Baraza citizens and leaders interface and engage on community driven development concerns. Barazas enabled Kayunga district create awareness on LED. Government programmes such as Youth Livelihoods Programmes where youth have received funds after receiving information from the Barazas on the existence of this fund.

The second objective was to analyse the contribution of NAs in LED. Literature revealed that NAs are a community engagement and accountability measure for citizen mobilisation (CEW-IT 2016), citizen

empowerment to address poverty (MakhokaEn, 2002) are foras for access to credit facilities, capacity, information (Canzeneli, 2000), support monitoring service delivery, support identification of local issues, and create community cohesion, are organized at village level with 20-200 members, have clear guidelines, meet regularly (CEW-IT, 2012; Storey, 2001). The findings revealed that NAs have a membership of 100 citizens from the surrounding villages. They have a leadership of nine ministries of health, education, water, gender, speaker, convener, agriculture, information and security. We learnt a lot in the NA and have acquired knowledge and skills to better our community. The ministries are led by ministers who are elected democratically by members and are gender sensitive. Do a supportive role of monitoring around the villages to identify issues within the community. The issues they identify as of concern in the community are tabled at an NA meeting which normally happens twice a month and discussed. The NA sits twice in a month, given the needs within the community. NAs in Kayonza were organized and trained by AHURICA, a CSO in Kayunga. Most of the members in this assembly are farmers growing maize, sweet potatoes, beans, greens among others; this has enhanced their economic status.

The third objective was to establish the factors affecting effectiveness of community assemblies in LED. Literature was reviewed showing political, economic and institutional factors; a weak policy framework, limited citizen participation, lack of information, leadership gaps, limited resources, weak coordination, limited access to credit, market, inputs, weak structures and internal conflicts (Adamovsky, 2012; Wainwright, 2003; Amin, 2004; North, 1991). Findings revealed that poor coordination affects the work of community assemblies, lack of access to information about government programmes, Barazas are termed as accusation platforms for civil servants on what they have not done; the one off time meetings, poor infrastructure facilities affect the work of assemblies, limited citizen participation, lack of recognition of nongovernmental established platforms such as Neighbourhood assemblies, conflicting policies such as the Public Order Management Act which we, inclusive of government officials must abide with while running any community engagement programmes, we are wondering, how government can fight its own programme, in the end this affects sustainability of the initiatives put in place. In addition, follow up

on issues presented to leaders in the community assemblies is weak and limited human and capital resources.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The conclusions from the findings are that; Barazas play a crucial role in the local economic agenda; they are avenues for awareness creation, information sharing on government programmes, problem identification and resolving of local problems. They are platforms for feedback, planning, accountability and monitoring of social and economic programs but also help in institutionalizing democracy, power and authority to locals on public sector management. It is imperative that the challenges faced by these assemblies are addressed such as conflicting policies and politics, corruption, unending complaints, accusations, fault finding and have not addressed real challenges. The major role of sorting political challenges instead of being consultation avenues as noted by (Haugerud, 1997) should be enhanced. In addition to the above, while the existence of Barazas is majorly to decentralise power to the locals, enhance monitoring, accountability, information sharing and planning, they are faced with structural challenges, conflicting policies and politics, corruption, unending complaints, accusations, fault finding and have not addressed real challenges. In-fact, they are avenues for sorting political challenges instead of being consultation avenues (Haugerud, 1997). Therefore, it is imperative that the structural challenges are dealt with by refocusing the goal and objectives of Barazas, if LED is to be fully realized in Kayonza Sub County.

Furthermore, once well organised, coordinated, owned, structured and legalised; Neighbourhood Assemblies can be a recipe for successful implementation of government programmes, poverty alleviation and economic empowerment. These assemblies contribute to citizen empowerment, citizen mobilisation, and engagement on issues of development and social wellbeing. One unique aspect of the NAs is their indigenous mobilisation, owned and managed by citizens themselves; this establishes their sustainability because they are not dependent on any institution. They empower citizens to demand for accountability and start up their own initiatives and participate in decision making and governance. Their work ought to be augmented by government structures to have their voices heard. Institutional factors were found to be vital for LED. Such factors include members' skills capacity development, fair rules and regulations,

ownership, power sharing and social participation in combination with economic factors could contribute to create dynamic processes with higher levels of growth (Adamovsky, 2012; North, 1991). Results indicated that communities were dissatisfied with the way government handled LED implementation policy in Kayonza Sub County. Luisa (2003) urges that institutions that maintain strong cohesion with state agencies often get positive dividends with less political interference. In effect members may not feel that they are left out in the development process which would contribute to greater participation and ownerships of institutions. Therefore, factors that inhibit local development efforts in Kayonza Sub County should be dealt with by granting more involvement of local communities in implementation so as to effectively contribute to LED.

The study targeted 30 respondents from a population of 137. According to Gay (1990) and Creswell (2004) in a qualitative study any number of respondents below 30 is representative of the study population. The sample size was 30 on the basis of the above authority. The study planned to reach out to 30 respondents instead 28 were met. Two of the respondents were not in the district at the time the researcher conducted the field visits. The overall response rate was 93%. This implies that the study findings were a good representation of the survey population (Amin, 2005). The findings indicate that Barazas play a crucial role in LED as mechanisms for awareness creation, information exchange, dissemination of information on government programs, and resolving local issues by finding community based solution.

- Barazas are a relevant avenue for giving progress and accountability, planning, engagement with citizens, interface; we need to make it a better forum for it can create and destroy the work of Government. We need everyone to appreciate why Barazas not other spaces, the lower governments need to understand them first so that they know how to use them and for what purpose, there should be an increased coordination between the lower governments and central government on the effectiveness and role of this assembly.

The study findings showed that NAs train citizens, create unity among local people and empower citizens to fight poverty; they are avenues for information and knowledge sharing. Citizens have also

testified of accessing inputs, seeds and market through these assemblies. In effect, NAs play a positive role helping local citizens realise their potential by identifying common problems and finding solutions to resolve them. NAs are a recipe for a better community, for a for successful implementation of government programmes, poverty alleviation and economic empowerment. The findings are supported by works of Makhoka (2002) who argued that without NAs poverty reduction is not possible as they add efforts towards citizen empowerment.

- NAs should be devoid of unconstructive politics but use it positively to allow politicians to bring in resources, training for members on their roles, registration of NAs with local governments for mutual partnership and use of the NAs as forums for information sharing and sensitization on government programmes.

The findings from the study indicate a top-down approach to resolving local economic problems is not effective. The approach does not enable increased citizen participation, consultation and involvement. The work of Community Assemblies is affected by poor infrastructure, poor communication, poor coordination of government programs, inadequate accountability spaces, conflict in policy framework, harassment of civil servants, climate change, low resource capacity at sub county and failure to recognize the role played by NAs, skills capacity development, fair rules and regulations, ownership, power sharing and social participation thus ignoring their contributions to LED. It is important that governments at all levels enhance citizen engagement, participation and consultation at every stage of development of government programmes. The role of the various representatives at different levels of leadership should be enhanced and ably facilitated to reach out to the citizens through these assemblies, for better performance of government programmes, the citizen should be at the fore front. It should also be noted that, top down programmes should be introduced to the citizens right from the onset to have them understand and own them.

- Enhance the standard of living of the people in Kayonza; enhance infrastructure to ease accessibility and affordability of social services and sensitize citizens and leaders on their role. The district should utilise the available foras to bridge the information gap between citizens and leaders to enable citizens' appreciation and ownership.

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