

Reimagining Rural Empowerment: Evaluating the Parish Development Model's Role in Inclusive and Sustainable Coffee Farming in Uganda

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Abstract

This study evaluates the Parish Development Model (PDM) as a decentralized rural development initiative aimed at enhancing the economic empowerment of coffee smallholder farmers in Hoima District, Uganda. Using a convergent mixed-methods approach, the research integrates Sen's Capability Approach, Resilience Theory, and Social Capital Theory to examine three dimensions: institutional support, resource capacity building, and community engagement. Quantitative data were collected from 278 farmers through stratified random sampling, while qualitative insights were obtained from 12 key informant interviews and 8 focus group discussions. Findings indicate that while PDM has improved coffee yields by 37% among beneficiaries and strengthened trust in SACCOs with transformational leadership, significant barriers persist, including elite capture, gender-based land tenure disparities, and low uptake of climate-smart practices. Policy recommendations include community-vetted beneficiary selection, gender-responsive governance measures, and climate-resilient financing. The results offer lessons for scalable decentralized development models applicable in ASEAN and other Global South contexts.

Keywords

Parish Development Model, coffee farming, economic empowerment, gender-climate nexus, decentralized governance

Introduction

Over the past decade, decentralization has gained prominence as a strategy for rural transformation in the Global South, especially in agriculture-dependent economies (Smoke, 2020). Uganda's Parish Development Model (PDM) embodies this shift by attempting to localize decision-making and financial disbursement. Existing literature underscores the potential of such models to enhance participation and tailor interventions to community-specific needs (Kauzya, Malik, & Mugabi,

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2022). However, the success of decentralization efforts often hinges on the quality of governance, inclusivity of financial mechanisms, and strength of local institutions (Cheema & Rondinelli, 2021).

Studies from India, Indonesia, and Kenya suggest that localized development models can improve efficiency only when supported by transparency, gender-sensitive targeting, and climate-responsive frameworks (Prasad & Menon, 2021; Ouma, Nshakira, & Atieno, 2020). Yet, there is limited empirical research linking gender equity and adaptive capacity—a gap this study addresses. Notably, PDM implementation in Uganda has faced critiques for elite capture, weak monitoring tools, and lack of integration with broader climate resilience strategies (MoLG, 2023; UN Women, 2023). Evidence from ND-GAIN (2022) and Jassogne, Vaast, and van Asten (2021) also highlights the urgent need to mainstream climate adaptation into rural financing systems, especially in coffee-producing regions like Hoima, which are increasingly vulnerable to drought and market instability.

Theoretically, the study is anchored in Sen's Capability Approach, which interrogates whether individuals can convert access to resources into real freedoms and opportunities (Sen, 1999). Resilience Theory (Folke, 2006) offers a lens for examining how farmers respond to socio-ecological stressors, emphasizing adaptive and transformational capacities. Finally, Social Capital Theory (Aldrich & Meyer, 2014) examines the role of community trust and cooperative networks in enabling inclusive transformation. This integrated framework offers a robust lens for evaluating the interplay between governance structures, gender dynamics, and climate resilience within decentralized rural systems.

Methodology

This study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to assess the implementation and outcomes of the Parish Development Model in Hoima District. Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires administered to 278 stratified randomly selected coffee farmers, ensuring representation across gender, age, and land tenure categories. Qualitative data were gathered through 12 key informant interviews with SACCO managers and parish chiefs, and 8 focus group discussions with coffee farmer groups, prioritizing the inclusion of women (60%), youth (25%), and persons with disabilities (5%).

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 26, employing descriptive statistics and logistic regression to identify predictors of economic agency and adaptive capacity. Qualitative transcripts were coded thematically in NVivo, following Braun and Clarke's six-step framework, combining deductive codes from the theoretical framework with inductive themes from farmer narratives. Ethical approval was obtained from the Makerere University Institutional Review Board, and informed consent was secured from all participants, with anonymity and confidentiality maintained.

Results and Discussion

Results has to be tied to the methodology and objectives stated. Results should be stated in alignment with the sequence of the methodology. Discussion should be concise and related to the results. Novelty should be stated in discussion. A brief comparison with others' research is highly recommended. Results and Discussion should be the main constitution of the paper.

Access to PDM Funds

Only 30% of respondents accessed PDM financing, with funds ranging from UGX 200,000 to UGX 800,000—below the policy target of UGX 1 million. Disbursement bottlenecks were attributed to "politicized targeting" and poor information flow. Gender inequality was stark: women accessed just 9% of funds despite forming the agricultural backbone.

Table 1. Socioeconomic Profile and PDM Access

Variable	Category	% Share	PDM Access (%)
Gender	Male	65%	42%
	Female	35%	9%
Land Tenure	Titled	28%	48%
	Customary	72%	15%
Climate Action	Agroforestry	12%	—
	None	63%	—

This disparity not only limits financial inclusion but also hampers household-level adaptive capacity. A novel finding from the regression analysis showed that a 1% increase in gender parity corresponded with a 0.6% rise in adaptive capacity, a statistically significant link that aligns with global studies on gender and climate resilience (UN Women, 2023; Notre Dame GAIN, 2022).

The governance challenges within PDM were also evident. FGDs revealed that in 73% of parishes, local elites manipulated fund allocation processes to benefit political or familial networks. This erosion of trust mirrors patterns observed in global post-disaster recovery programs (Aldrich & Meyer, 2014). Additionally, 45% of surveyed parishes lacked basic IT infrastructure, delaying fund disbursement by up to 16 months. This "decentralization inertia" points to critical capacity gaps in local government systems.

Table 2: PDM Fund Access by Gender

Access to PDM Financing	Frequency	Percentages (%)
No Access to PDM Funds	42	85%
Accessed PDM Funds	236	15%
Total	278	100%

On the climate front, 63% of farmers had adopted no climate adaptation practices, and only 12% had implemented agroforestry or soil conservation techniques. Although 28% reported diversification into poultry or beekeeping, truly transformational adaptation such as irrigation remained rare (<5%).

Despite these constraints, there were bright spots. Farmers engaged in transparent SACCOs reported 55% higher loan repayment rates, underscoring the importance of accountable governance. Some parishes demonstrated proactive planning and gender-responsive fund targeting, though these were the exception rather than the rule.

The study also identifies scalable insights for other Global South countries exploring community-based financial empowerment. For example, Indonesia's *BUMDesa* rural enterprise model could benefit from adopting PDM-style ring-fenced funding but must incorporate real-time audit mechanisms to prevent elite capture. Similarly, the Philippines' *Barangay*-based systems could replicate SACCOs as vehicles for climate-resilient microfinance, especially in disaster-prone areas.

Conclusion

The PDM represents a bold step toward decentralized rural empowerment, but its success hinges on strategic reforms. First, joint land titling and 50% female SACCO leadership must be enforced to unlock women's financial agency. Second, at least 30% of PDM funds should be earmarked for climate-resilient infrastructure and adaptive technologies. Third, public-facing digital dashboards and community oversight committees should be implemented to reduce elite capture and boost transparency. These reforms can position the PDM as a model for inclusive rural transformation across the Global South, particularly in ASEAN nations pursuing localized social business models.

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