
Leveraging Social Capital through Youth Groups in Northern Uganda: Lessons for Enhancing Inclusivity by Social and Solidarity Economy Organizations

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Abstract

After two decades of civil conflict in Northern Uganda, Ugandans are now returning to their communities to reestablish their livelihoods. Most youth don't have skills to venture into Agriculture. The objective of the study was to establish the role social capital played in the success of agricultural enterprises run by youth. This study was anchored on Collective action theory by Mancur Olson 1965. Research was carried out in four project districts. In each district, two Focus Group Discussions were held with sampled youth from the program beneficiaries; each focused group discussion was comprised of five female and five male youth. Also four Key Informant Interviews, one per district were held. 415 youth from the project beneficiaries were sampled out through simple random sampling and purposive sampling. Cleaned data was coded and analyzed with the help of a computer package ATLAS. Findings from these studies were triangulated with program reports and staff reflection and experiences. The research established that through social capital there were improved peer to peer networks and relationships, it became easier for youth to access training and resources, Market accessibility became easier, there was access to cheap labor, social capital increased democratic voice, women and girls became empowered. This study is important because youth are deemed to be a marginalized and largest population cohort in developing nations;

Key words: Social capital, inclusivity, Solidarity groups, agricultural productivity.

JSSBT, Vol. 2 No. 2 (December, 2021), pp. 11 – 16, © 2021 The Co-operative University of Kenya

INTRODUCTION

After two decades of civil conflict in Northern Uganda, Ugandans are now returning to their communities to reestablish their livelihoods. Uganda has the youngest population in the world and the highest youth unemployment rate in sub-Saharan Africa, with youth making up 80% of the unemployed (GOU, 2014). According to (World Bank, 2020) the latest official estimates, between 2012 and 2016 poverty increased moderately from 19.7 percent to 21.4 percent, and inequality rose as the Gini index went from 41 to 42.8. Girls fare worse than boys accessing education, with many dropping out of school. (GOU, 2014). According to (world, Bank 2020) While Uganda's youth are renowned for being

highly enterprising, fewer than 4% of Ugandans are employers.

In partnership with The Mastercard Foundation, National Cooperative Business Association (NCBA) Cooperative League of United States of America (CLUSA) implemented the five-year Youth Empowerment through Agriculture program in Northern and Midwestern Uganda in the districts of Dokolo, Kole, Masindi, and Kiryandongo. Along with its partners Youth Alive Uganda and Reproductive Health Uganda and program learning partner the Overseas Development Institute, The project had the following four objectives: 1) forming and strengthening youth associations 2) improving the well-being and confidence of youth association members through enhanced foundational skills 3) increasing

access to financial services for youth association members and 4) developing the technical and entrepreneurial skills of youth association members so they can launch their businesses. Social capital is a broad term that encompasses the 'norms and networks facilitating collective actions for mutual benefits (Woolcock,1998; Coleman,1998). The economic literature has largely considered social capital along the lines of Putnam (1995). Social capital as one of the forms of capital asset is defined as the 'features of social life - networks, norms and trust- that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives'' For him, social capital involves trust, reciprocity, and information the transition from individualist identity to a community identity. Social capital according to Durlauf (2002), as the institutions and informal organizations based on social relationships, networks, and associations that create shared knowledge, mutual trust, and social norms.

The modern debate on social capital arose from a publication by Bourdieu (1980). The French sociologist defined the concept, giving to it visibility and recognition at an academic level. Social capital is created through the belonging to some group, where people are endowed with common properties and also with permanent and stable links. Bourdieu inserted social capital theory in the context of the reproduction of social status, as a determining factor of stratification. According to him, social capital is a factor that increases inequalities in society, giving a tool to 'upper class people' to reproduce their own status.

After this publication many scholars concentrated their efforts on the analysis of social capital, basing their research on strong ideological positions. Social capital is an investment in social relations with expected returns in the market place. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines social capital as networks together with shared norms, values, and understanding that facilitates cooperation within or among groups. It enables

individuals and groups to trust each other and work together. The Youth Empowerment Through Agriculture model categorized social capital in three forms: bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. Bonding capital is within groups, bridging capital is between groups, and linking social capital is connecting to people or groups in positions of power and influence.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods were largely used for this study. Data collection took a period of several weeks in July 2019, across the four districts of Kiryandongo, Masindi, Kole and Dokolo. 415 youth from project beneficiaries were sampled out for the study through simple random sampling and purposive sampling. In each of district, two Focus Group Discussions were held with sampled youth. Each focused group discussion was comprised of five female and five male youth. In addition to focused group discussions, the project conducted four Key Informant Interviews, one per district. Key informant interviews were conducted with Community Development Officers, Agricultural Officers, Sub County Chiefs, Parish Chiefs, Local Council 1 Chairpersons, mentors, and private sector actors. Once data was collected and cleaned, it was coded and analyzed using a computer package ATLAS.

Findings from these interviews were triangulated with the program reports and staff reflections and experiences. It should be noted that some of the outcomes reported in this study were unintended and as a result, baseline information was not originally collected. Though the study documents these outcomes, it was difficult to quantify some changes without baseline data.

Youth Empowerment through Agriculture approach: The Youth Empowerment Through Agriculture project consortium addressed challenges faced by youth in agriculture – such as low levels of productivity, access to resources, and low skill levels – by facilitating the creation of a network of youth associations and cooperatives. Before participating in the

project, the majority of rural youth in project areas of intervention worked on small pieces of land provided by their parents or communities, without the necessary skills or finance to farm productively. Many youth did not effectively manage the little income they generated and often did not know how to best invest their surpluses. Youth Empowerment through Agriculture youth associations acted as a vehicle to address these obstacles by providing access to formal training and mentorship so that young people had the skills to produce higher yields and invest wisely. Once formed, groups were encouraged to choose a mentor to support their group endeavors and form a village savings and loans association (VSLA) so they could save money for their individual and group businesses. Groups functioned as a means for empowering youth with low self-esteem and for demonstrating that change and better livelihoods are possible.

Additionally, it was easier for groups to access resources – including land, information, and concessionary loans – provided by government or other NGOs, than it is for individuals. The Youth Empowerment through Agriculture youth benefited economically and socially from their social networks and relationships but this did not happen by chance. Creating bonds among youth starts with how they are mobilized and screened. The project started with mobilizing youth ages 15 - 24 that are from the same community (parish) 4, out of school, unemployed/underemployed, and have an interest in engaging in agriculture as a business. These criteria joined youth with common ambitions and challenges together to form a group of 30 members, select their leaders, and define a group mission and constitution that outlines rules and expectations for members. Thereafter, these associations pursued business opportunities both on and off -the-farm.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Access to training and resources: The project helped Youth Associations and youth-

led cooperatives register with the relevant government authorities. Registered groups and cooperatives were better organized and therefore attracted extension workers from the private sector, government, and other development partners that provided them with training and access to new technologies (e.g. seeds, sprayers, agrochemicals, and fertilizers). Project youth received inputs cumulatively worth UGX 97,600,000 (USD 25,562.20) from private sector actors. The Ugandan Government preferred supporting youth in groups form (versus working with them individually). Government programs such as Operation Wealth Creation (OWC), the Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF III), and the Youth Livelihood Program (YLP) gave youth attached to the project those in Youth Associations and cooperatives a cumulative total of UGX 499,650,400 (USD 130,862) in form of grants and loans. Jesus Heals Youth Group in Kigulya Division in Masindi for example reported accessing 8.5 million UGX (2,291.03 USD) from YLP; they used this to purchase a grinding mill.

Access to Markets: The Youth Empowerment through Agriculture project organized and registered youth into groups. The youth in groups bulked large volumes of agricultural products, they then connected not only with market but also to other resource partners through their social links. Youth in Kole and Dokolo districts for example made MOUs with the international organizations such as World Vision and other large commercial off - taker Ngetta Holdings Limited to buy sunflower. World Vision contracted Akalo Youth Joint Cooperative to supply them with potato vines under a project that promotes orange flesh sweet potatoes. Akalo Youth Joint Cooperative reported earning UGX 6,500,000 (USD 1,702.40) per season from that arrangement. Word Vision then supplied the potato vines to their farmers. The implication here therefore is that when youth come together they can bulk and attract market and be able to meet the cost of

transporting their produce to distant market and also bargain for better prices.

Access to cheap labor: During Focused group discussions and Key informant interviews, youth reported that working together promoted teamwork and reduced the burden and drudgery associated with farming alone. In groups, young people combined their efforts and supported one another in garden work. Previously idle youth became productive farmers because they were supported by their friends in opening and ploughing land and weeding. The project taught youth to use land tilling schedules to more effectively allocate their labor across pieces of land, resulting in more efficient production. The benefits were seen by youth, which encouraged even more youth participation.

Enhanced Technical expertise and entrepreneurship: Youth continued learning life and technical skills from their fellow Youth Association members. Youth reported gaining new skills such as knitting, hairdressing, marketing, and brickmaking in their groups. One youth from Kiryandongo for example reported learning brickmaking from a friend that helped him earn UGX 1,500,000 (USD 404) last year. In total, the project helped 26,856 youth launch their businesses both on and off farm. By working on their group enterprises together, youth learned good agronomic practices (i.e. spacing, using improved seeds, spraying, and conservation farming) that they then applied to their individual farms. This helped youth increase yields which helped them get better prices and ultimately, increase their incomes.

Establishment of deeper peer to peer networks: Youth built new friendships, creating a network of mutual support. Youth relied on their fellow Youth Association members in times of sadness, disappointment, and grief. Those bonds were also important in happier times when members got married, had children, and celebrated birthdays. Youth reported that it was easier for them to give and receive advice from one another after they had established a

shared vision and worked together in their groups. Mutual support also extends to financial safety nets through their Village savings and Loans Associations.

Increased Voice and Democratic choice: Youth Association members elected their group leaders (Chairpersons, Treasures and Secretaries) which engendered a sense of ownership, compelling youth to invest their time, energy, and resources in collective action. Cooperative principles and good governance are key elements to deepening these groups' social capital. Democratic practices in Youth Associations created trust, unity, and mutual respect which are necessary elements for youth to pool their savings, invested in their enterprises, and reduced conflict.

Empowered Women and girls: Out of the 27,130 youths reached, 43% were young women and girls. The Youth Empowerment through Agriculture project intentionally encouraged young women and girls' participation by employing the following strategies: 1) The project delivered clear information about its objectives during sensitization meetings and had husbands and parents of female youth sign consent forms to make them feel comfortable in allowing them to freely participate in the program; 2) groups were mandated to elect at least one female into its leadership (i.e. 1 peer educator, 1 Youth association leader, and 1 Village savings and loan association leader); 3) trainings did not go beyond two hours so female youth could return home and tend to their other responsibilities; 5) young mothers were encouraged to bring their children's caretakers to the trainings so they could fully participate; 6) community leaders were sensitized on the importance of young females accessing land; 7) young husbands and wives that fitted in to the projects selection criteria were encouraged to join a group together.

Opportunity to grow leaders: The project provided youth with a myriad of opportunities to step into leadership roles either within their associations or in their

communities at large. Youth Associations built youth's confidence to become leaders in their communities and as a result, 1,102 (733 males and 369 females) were elected as Local Council (LC) 16 and Council Representatives. Youth Association leaders were regarded by their peers as informed, solution providers with authority. These leaders built informal networks among themselves for information sharing on where to secure good prices, access markets, and solve problems.

Concern for community: As bonds between youth, adults, and community leaders matured and grew, youth increasingly were volunteering to better their communities. Youth were responding to community concerns in their free time – including helping the elderly with their gardens and other household chores; cleaning community health centers, water collection points, community pit latrines, and roads; and slashing grass and sweeping church compounds. In Kiryandongo for example, YAs helped LC1s clean roads and boreholes. Those efforts encouraged young people to play more prominent roles in their communities and eventually become elected Local Council 1 representatives, members of government Village Health Teams, and church leaders. In Kole, Note Enteko Youth association and Rwot Kisa Youth Association in Dokolo and Akek Youth Association helped three catechists from St. Paul Catholic Church, St. Daniel Komboni Catholic Church, and St. Luke Eucharist Catholic Church rent and open up land for farming. Each YA member contributed 2,000 UGX (.53 USD) in appreciation for the catechists' role in the community.

Limitations of the study: The youth are very mobile and although simple random sampling was used purposive sampling had to be used to compliment and find the required sample size. It is also important to note that some of the outcomes reported in this study were unintended and as a result, baseline information was not originally collected. It

was difficult to quantify some changes without baseline data.

CONCLUSION

To work with legally registered groups (registered with Government structures) such as youth Associations and cooperatives is very important for the agricultural sector. Since these groups are built on norms and networks facilitating collective actions for mutual benefits. This is key for sustainability and inclusivity SSE organizations. Social capital, which is a productive resource built from social interactions between actors as exhibited in this study brought about the following benefits: 1) Access to training and other resources from Government and other stakeholders: 2) Better access to markets: 3) access to cheap labour: 4) Enhanced Technical expertise and entrepreneurship: 5) Establishment of deeper peer to peer relationships and understanding: 6) Empowered women and girls, grew leaders as well as helping solve the community problems. These are very key ingredients in sustaining any SSE and bringing inclusivity. This approach could be tried out by other organizations working with youth in the agricultural sector.

Areas for further studies: Further studies should be done to establish how social capital can contribute to development of leaders.

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