

Do self-help initiatives matter? A review on the efficacy of community-led poverty reduction through self-help groups in Uganda

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Abstract

The motivation of this study was to review some hitherto less attended to information on the self-help initiatives in Uganda. This study aimed to assess the significance of self-help groups in the country. Self-help initiatives have existed for some good time but academics have not paid adequate attention to their mode of operation and significance especially in terms of contributing to community poverty reduction. Self-help initiatives are attempts by concerned individuals and groups to bridge the gaps between the efforts of governments at overall national development and the near-total invisibility of many of these communities. Provided they are demand-driven and environmentally friendly, there are no limits to the range of projects that qualify to be executed in the rural communities through self-help initiatives. The only requirements are institutional capacity and/or the willingness to build one, support, and manage such projects sustainably. Consequently, this study analyses a set of four aspects, viz. the different self-help initiatives, the effectiveness of self-help initiatives in poverty alleviation, challenges faced by different self-help groups, and the coping strategies. The outcomes suggest the critical role of governments in providing the enabling environment and in moderating the forces of culture and ethnicity, as residents of a rural community strive for self-emancipation in order to be able to exert sufficient control over an environment that appears to them as given and inflexible to the elements favouring self-help groups. This article contributes to the growing body of information on the significance of self-help initiatives by emphasizing considerable efforts that can be adopted to make self-help more meaningful.

Keywords: *Self-help, Demand-driven, poverty reduction, community-led*

1. Introduction

Throughout history, people have formed groups with others who have something in common with them, and oppressed people have joined together to overcome the conditions they face. Self-help groups, as we know them, go back at least to the 1930s, when alcoholics anonymous started in the USA, while self-help groups have distinct characteristics, the philosophies of the self-help movement overlap with various other ways of working. A self-help group is about people coming together with others who are affected by a particular issue (experience, disadvantage, discrimination, etc.) to support each other and to work together to change the disadvantage affecting them. The self-help group (SHG) model has become very popular recently with both national and international organizations having a keen interest in it. The groups are seen as sustainable and are viewed positively for directly involving the poor. Many reports have found them to be very successful in poverty alleviation and contribution to other aspects of development, especially in rural areas among the poorest of the poor and especially among women. This model is used in many developing countries in different aspects ranging from health, education to community development in Asia, South

America, and other African countries (Koskenniemi, 2022; Bitney, 2022; Shaari & Waller, 2022; Landstad, Hedlund & Kendall, 2022; Durst & Cangelosi, 2021; Kutyba, Jedrzejczak, Gos, Bieńkowska, Ray-Koziak & Skarzyński, 2021; Brett 1992).

In the Uganda context, for many years, originations including the self-help group approach (supported by Kinder Not Hilfe), Plan Uganda, CARE International, International Organization for migration, Uganda women concern ministry, self-help Africa, and Global giving have been using this model to start groups like these in Uganda. Although the groups are called different names by the different organizations their structures are very similar and the small differences often do not greatly alter how they are run.) In Uganda in the recent past, some efforts have been made to include the rural people on the development agenda through poverty eradication projects and programs like the Entandikwa schemes (1995) and prosperity for all (2006) both intended at supporting the poor. The poverty alleviation Department (PAD) in State House was established in 2000 as a clearing house for pledges made by President Yoweri Museveni. In 2003, the department was mandated to develop wealth creation models. The department has so far designed more than 12 initiatives aimed at increasing productivity and value addition. Recent a model parish an innovation evolved by the President to demonstrate how systematically a high concentration of projects in a model parish can be used to tackle poverty and speed up rural transformation have introduced across the country. The key pillars of the parish development model include income generation, food security, home improvement, value addition and marketing, and savings and credit.

Generally, development efforts seek to improve people's welfare. There is a drive to raise the overall productivity of an economy, to increase available surplus as well as expand its capital base presumably by forgoing a certain amount of immediate consumption of this surplus in favour of investment. the self-help approach seeks to use voluntary grassroots organizations to restrain this desire and to, in a participatory way and outside government budgets, ultimately provide for the people's basic (food and non-food) needs by mobilizing private resources (Gillespie, 2018). The self-help strategy connotes a program of activities involving the concerted efforts of members of a given community aimed at providing some basic amenities in that community. It entails the development of the resources of the community by efforts of members of that community alone, instead of relying on outside initiatives or assistance (Christiansen, Walter, Zomorodbakhsch, Sartakhti & Hübner, 2021). It is an inward-looking approach to self or group improvement, which relies solely on own efforts and largely for own benefit.

A Self-help group is about people coming together with others who are affected by a particular issue (experience, disadvantage, discrimination, etc.) to support each other and to work together to change the disadvantage affecting them (SHIFT Recovery Community, 2022). Activities that self-help groups do include recovery programmes, thwarting domestic violence, ensuring rights for vulnerable groups, psycho-social interventions, psycho-social rehabilitation, community education, fighting against poverty, community development, micro-credit programming, ensuring housing affordability, etc. (Shaari & Waller, 2022; Sato, Shimamura & Lastarria-Cornhiel, 2022; Landstad, Hedlund & Kendall, 2022; Biney, 2022; Abdulai, Bukari & Fuseini, 2022; Dulhunty, 2022; Schönwiese & Wegscheider, 2021; Afeamekpor, Adjei-Kumi, Nani, kissi & Tengan, 2021; Zhang, Lin, Sun, Sun, Shao, Cao & Cao, 2021). They are made of and controlled by the people affected. Group members are not volunteers. While the work is usually unpaid, members work to change their own situations and the support is mutual. The knowledge base of self-help mutual support groups is experiential, indigenous, and rooted in the wisdom that comes from struggling with problems in concrete, shared ways. Self-help group builds on the strengths of their members (Akpomovie, 2010). Community development through self-help has become a familiar feature in contemporary Uganda. Self-help groups exist for credits, like the Alutkot SACCO in Oyam Northern Uganda, which work through the small saver-borrowers to make loans readily available. there are also self-help groups for agricultural production, construction of public facilities (roads, bridges, markets, schools, churches, etc.) provision of health care facilities; social welfare, and mutual protection, such as neighbourhood watch association (CBU, 2013).

2. Objective of the study

This study aims to analyse the operation and significance of self-help initiatives in Uganda. In addressing this objective, four questions are answered, viz.: (i) what are the different self-help initiatives adopted by different communities in Uganda? (ii) How effective is self-help initiatives in poverty alleviation? (iii) What are the challenges faced by different self-help groups? And (iv) What are the coping strategies for the challenges faced by self-help groups?

3. Outcomes and Discussions

3.1 *The concept of self-help group*

A self-help group consists of 10 to 20 members in most cases. The members save some amount of money that they can afford. It is usually a small amount that all members can afford either weekly or per month. A monthly meeting is organized, where apart from disbursement & repayment of loans, formal and informal discussions are held on many social-related issues. Members share their experiences in these groups (Landstad, Hedlund & Kendall, 2022; Dulhunty, 2022). The minutes of these meetings are documented and the accounts are written. The president, Secretary, and Treasurer are three official posts in any SHG. If the SHGs are connected with some NGOs, they take part in other social activities of those NGOs. Of late, the organizational structure of various micro-financial groups is undergoing significant changes. There are Thrift groups; Credit management groups, Income generating groups, Self-help groups, and Mutual help groups. Sometimes the institute that promotes the SHG, itself provides loan facilities. It is called as Micro-Finance Institute. The SHG Approach is a right-based approach that views poverty as the denial of rights and poverty alleviation as a process of reclaiming one's rights (Faturoti, 2022; Ventura, Rached, Martins, Pereira, Trivellato & Guerra, 2021). Given the multi-dimensional nature of poverty, however, the SHG Approach puts equal emphasis on the goals of economic, social, and political empowerment in order to achieve these goals (Almeida, Barata & Daniel, 2022). This offers a framework and guidance for establishing a 'People's Institution' which provides an environment of trust and cooperation in which people come to realize they are able to help themselves to achieve the economic, social, and political goals that they themselves define.

Accordingly, the implementation of the SHG Approach revolves around a number of key steps that are set out in detail in this piece and include: Identifying the very poor, mobilizing them, and helping them realize their rights by building their capacity so that they can participate equally in society. Bringing large numbers of people together in small, homogenous groups that meet and share their experiences, concerns, and ideas on a weekly basis. Generating an attitudinal change in members so that they can unleash their God-given potential (Mourão & Brown, 2022). This is achieved by helping members realize that they are worthy, have potential, and can take action for their own development, Establishing the structures of a People's Institution as small groups coming to work together through larger clusters, and eventually through a large representative organization that works to bring about structural changes. Supporting the structures of the People's Institution to establish linkages to relevant stakeholders on community, district, regional, and even national levels. Handing overall ownership and responsibility to the People's Institutions after developing their capacity to continue independently and sustainably.

3.2 *The Effectiveness of Self-help initiatives*

The emergence of self-help groups can be seen as a response to industrialization, the breakdown of the kinship system, and the decline of the community although alternative views see it in a reflection of an ineffective, inefficient, and dehumanizing formal system of care. Currently, the increasing interest in providing services that are family-centred is also considered a factor contributing to the increased number of self-help groups. Despite the variety of explanations for the self-help phenomenon, the consensus is that there is a need for a new model to supplement and complement professional services, and that self-help groups

are growing at an unprecedented speed worldwide. For example, about two percent of Canadians belonged to self-help groups in 1987. was estimated to have some type of involvement in a self-help group, and cancer self-help groups were found to be prevalent in major cities in China (Mok & Zhang 2001) in the United States, self-help group participation amounted to 10 million in 1996 and it was recently noted that more Americans try to change their health behaviours through self-help than through all other forms of professional programs combined. The proliferation of self-help groups in various countries can be seen as an initial indication of self-help group effectiveness because groups will cease to exist without value. The self-help movement is becoming a global phenomenon. In some countries, self-help groups are already for every medical condition led by the World Health Organization and they are serving people who encounter almost every physical behavioural, and emotional problem.

According to Heinrichs, Schultz, Hummel, Jutjens and Loerbroks (2022), once people are engaged in gainful self-employment, it is worthwhile and this may be on or off-farm activities People will put part of wage labour or subsistence production into investments that will bring about strong support systems. In the end, poverty levels will reduce a livelihoods are improved and people are able to meet their basic needs like food, shelter, good health, and taking children to school. Self-help initiatives allow people to do things they are able to do which result in a range of sustainable livelihood outcomes such as self-esteem. Security, happiness, and power Sustainable livelihoods influence adaptation to environmental stress and resilience to vulnerabilities.

3.3 Challenges faced by self-help groups

In spite of the rapid growth of self-help groups in Uganda, the full potential of utilizing self-help groups remains untapped. One of the reasons may be attributed to the lack of systematic research and solid methodological foundations little were known about how helpful self-help groups are to members, and what kind of social impact they have thought about. The research component of the self-help phenomenon has clearly been left behind by the self-help movement itself (Landstad, Hedlund & Kendall, 2022). The self-help approach is subject to changes in public modes and opinions and is also limited by the volatility of available investment funds and the challenges of private entrepreneurs. Besides, the existence of small isolated and scattered villages makes mobilization difficult and the provision of social service exorbitantly expensive. Often also, the interdependence and synergies among the different projects are ignored. For instance, such pertinent questions us what happens if education but not health care is provided? And, how effective is a school built through communal efforts which may remain underage because there are no access roads?

Self-help groups suffer with dearth of generating adequate peer support, which may be achieved if the environment of self-help is well structured (Landstad, Hedlund & Kendall, 2022). This, in a way would facilitate the growth of upcoming self-awareness, enhance acceptance and changes as well as facilitating the establishing of novel skills and allow for the transfer of learning to new environments. This void is very detrimental to both the growth as well as the continued survival of self-help groups in Uganda (Biney, 2022; Burnette, Davies & Mazzeo, 2022). Moreover, the main philosophy behind self-help groups is community transformation and the main concern is that by coming together, members can improve their lives.

The CBR experience shows that it's easier to facilitate the formation of self-help groups in rural areas (Shaari & Waller, 2022; Peacock, 2021). The formation of self-help groups in urban settings can be particularly difficult because of frequent irrigation and difficulties in building and a sense of belonging among group members. Although a should be noted that in rural are geographical isolation and the long distances group members may need to travel, and the limited means of communication may make it difficult to hold regular meetings.

The CBR experience indicates that women's groups are generally easier to form than groups for men. Women tend to have a stronger sense of solidarity towards one another and work more easily in a collaborative way. Where groups have male and female members, it is

important to ensure that women are represented, their voices heard and their lies discussed Within self-help groups, members may have varying levels of education is likely that people with disabilities will have lower levels of education and therefore may be a disadvantage. It is important that self-help meetings are not ponded by taking people who may have a higher level of education, and for those self-help groups that a based around microcredit important that there is not an uneven distribution of the benefit (Lennerholt, Van Laere & Söderström, 2021). To prevent inequalities from within groups, time needs to be dedicated to the many stages of group formations to build a sense of cohesion and empowerment among the less interne or vocal members.

Many groups have been formed for and by individuals with similar impairments. We single implement groups have a clear and well-defined purpose often cross-disability groups are more practical in small communities where there are few people with one particular type of Impairment. The basic needs of people with disabilities, respective of their impairments same, e.g. food, shelter, health care, and education Single-impairment groups can often divide people with disabilities and set up a competition for scarce resources.

3.4 Coping strategies for the challenges faced by self-help groups

In the light of these gaps, self-help need not exist independently of government. However, government intervention should generally seek to provide a favourable operational environment iron for the execution of self-help projects in rural areas. For instance, there is no point in legislating against informal money lenders while cooperative credit societies are yet to replace them as sources of consumer loans. Nor is there any justification in bounding ethnic vigilante groups while our official security outfits cannot guarantee any level of security to lives and property.

Government institutions must be available to give self-help groups the right incentives, including property rights and a reliable judicial system, Social policies should target the promotion of health, and education (especially for women and social capital as a form of ensuring security of tenure ship as this has served in India, China and Kenya (Rao, Royo-Olid & Turkstra, 2022; He, Zhang, You & Wu, 2022; Ouma, Corburn & Weru, 2022). Police reform measures, which should be rural-development oriented with the rural man as the main focus should therefore seek to, Exploit comparative regional and technical advantages within the country. Encourage production and marketing contract arrangements for crops that are required by the emerging agro-based industries, create more marketing channels and chain the rural areas to encourage competitive purchasing and protection against unfair prices, and direct and marketing research to identification of social, economic, political, and technical constraints to the functioning of rural industries, Provide well-equipped vocational training centres to train people in the maintenance of community-based projects; and Address the problem of improving the performance of hath the formal and informal sector services by mobilizing encouraging producers/providers of such services through training, provision of equipment and credit facilities

New self-help groups can learn from already established groups in the community; for instance, they can benefit from inviting members from existing self-help groups within the community new self-help pomp will value most the experience of people in circumstances similar to their Early contact between self-help groups of people with disabilities is important for learning future links and mutual help (Chids, 2022). This can help in both self-help initiatives as well as other newly formed community groups. Groups may be hesitant about getting involved in social or political action at first because they feel they lack the know-how, or ability to with time, pence and encouragement, group members will begin to discover their ability to understand, plan and implement the activities needed to change their situation, e.g. mobilizing the community in the form of a petition to focal authorities as a few step towards the safe drinking water and improved sanitation.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that self-help initiatives offer community members vital opportunities

both to activate and to make use of the rural community's productive resources so as to mobilize them for gainful transformation. This study reveals how rural schemes can only be meaningful to rural communities if the latter is involved at every stage of project identification formulation, planning and implementation. As rightly presented in this paper, it should be noted that increased people's participation cannot be expected in situations where development projects were imposed on them by 'outsiders who are more often less-knowledgeable of the real needs of the affected commies. This strengthens the element of self-help initiatives as one of the key means to achieving meaningful community transformation.

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