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# "Let It Come From the People": Exploring Decentralization, Participatory Processes, and Community Empowerment in Western, Rural Uganda

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# "Let It Come From the People":

## Exploring Decentralization, Participatory Processes, and Community Empowerment in Western, Rural Uganda

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SIT Uganda Development Studies

Fall 2013

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Location: Kibaale District, Uganda

# <u>Acknowledgements</u>

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## Abstract

This study sought to understand the extent to which the participatory planning framework established in the Local Government Act of 1997 is utilized and to what extent it encourages and results in genuine community empowerment for rural communities.More specifically, it aimed to understand the extent of genuine citizen participation by assessing the degree to which community members feel that they are empowered to participate in strategies for rural development at all levels of the government. Additionally, this project sought to explore the position that the Epicenter Managers have within the participatory framework established for rural development, with a particular focus on if and how they stimulate genuine, meaningful community participation in the formation, implementation, and evaluation of rural development policies.

Situated in Kibaale District in western Uganda in the sub counties of: Burora, Kabamba, Mugarama, Muhorro, and Pachwa, this research project relied on semi-structured formal interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation engaging community members, local government officials, and the Epicenter Managers. Formal interviews began on October 31st, 2013 and the research concluded formally on November 21st, 2013.

The study found that the participatory framework established through the decentralization structure is not fully utilized and that the majority of rural

community members feel that there are not adequate mechanisms in place for them to meaningfully influence the national policy framework for development. The main explanations provided for this failure of the decentralization structure to result in community empowerment were: elite capture, whereby political leaders at various levels siphon off resources that are allocated for rural development, corruption, whereby political leaders use patronage systems to gain support as opposed to pursuing development strategies for the entire community, lack of effective participation by community members, and a lack of adequate fiscal resources for lower local governments.

# I. Introduction

*"If people can be fully involved in their development and if we have effective policies, then rural transformation can be realized gradually"*
–Reverend Charles Araali, BuroraSubcounty

Thevalue of participatory approaches to solving pressing social issues is widely recognized by governments, organizations, and community members throughout the world. The "centrality of popular participation to the development process", first espoused by visionaries such as Paulo Freire and Kurt Lewin, has grown to be recognized and put into action by influential organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (Connell, 1997). Likewise, the principle of citizen participation in development planning processes is enshrined in both the Uganda Constitution of 1995 and the Local Government Act of 1997. The Local Government Act of 1997 states in its preamble that one of its main purposes is: "to provide for decentralization at all levels of local governments to ensure good

governance and democratic participation in, and control of, decision making by the people."(Local Government Act, 1997).

There is a significant gap that persists between the needs of rural communities and the services available to meet them, in spite of the legal framework in place for meaningful, grassroots participation in the process of rural development. Studies on the process and effects of governance decentralization in Uganda have focused on the legitimacy of political devolution, the fiscal arrangements and challenges of decentralization, and troubling patterns of recentralization (Kakumba, 2010; Muhumuza, 2008). Few studies, however, have examined the effectiveness of the participatory planning processes established in Local Government Act of 1997 in terms of empowering rural communities to effectively participate in and influence development strategies at the local, regional, and national level.

This study focuses on the effectiveness of mechanisms for participation in the rural development process embedded in the local governance structure of Uganda. To understand the effectiveness of these mechanisms, the researcher, through interviews and focus discussions, gathered the perspectives of community members, government officials, and development practitioners on the extent of community participation in government-supported rural development, the effectiveness of existing rural development strategies, and the causes of and potential solutions to rural underdevelopment. The emphasis of the study on community members' perspectives is grounded in a belief that one central indication of genuinely participatory processes is that community members themselves feel empowered and experience ownership of the development interventions.

This study was based in Kibaale District in Mid-Western Uganda and facilitated by a leading rural development organization, Uganda Rural

Development and Training Programme (URDT). The researcher formed a partnership with the organization, which matched the researcher with one of the strategic interventions of the organization, the Epicenter Strategy. The Epicenter Strategy is a partnership between URDT and the local government that aims to catalyze rural transformation by increasing the capacity of communities and their leaders to envision and implement development strategies. The researcher was matched with five rural transformation specialists, Epicenter Managers, who operate in five sub-counties in Kibaale District: Burora, Kabamba, Mugarama, Muhoro, and Pachwa. The Epicenter Managers not only served as gracious hosts, but also as research consultants, matching the researcher with interviews, interpreting when necessary, and providing guidance for the researcher in terms of content and strategy.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 The Concept of Participation

One critical conceptual framework for this research project is participatory development processes. Participatory, like democratic or sustainable, is a word that is excessively used by development practitioners and organizations andtherefore requires proper definition. Fox and Meyer define community participation as: "the involvement of citizens in a wide range of administrative policy-making activities, including the determination of levels of service, budget priorities, and the acceptability of physical construction projects in order to orient government programs toward community needs, build public support, and encourage a sense of cohesiveness within society" (1995). At its root, genuine participatory approaches are about shifting power from professionals and politicians towards the intended beneficiaries of the development intervention. Participatory approaches to development involve local participation not only in

the planning processes, but also in monitoring and evaluation of the intervention. Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation seeks to increase downward accountability wherein community members themselves set indicators for progress and success and decide whether the intervention has been successful at meeting those indicators. (Plan, Monitor, and Evaluate).

The expected benefits of participatory approaches include: building a sense of ownership within the community, developing credibility for the intervention, ensuring access to a broader set of development perspectives and ideas, and building trust and unity within the community (Plan, Monitor, and Evaluate). More fundamentally, development scholars who espouse participatory approaches argue that development interventions cannot be genuinely effective at meeting the needs of the community without meaningful participation in the development process by community members themselves (Mohammed, 2010). Participatory approaches are therefore not merely beneficial processes, but actually central to the development process.

Development scholars warn that processes that are participatory in name do not necessarily involve the transfer of power that is central to genuinely participatory processes. The widespread appeal of participatory processes, White argues, have helped to conceal other political or institutional motives that may in fact be contrary to the central tenants of participatory methodologies. White states: "Participation, while it has the potential to challenge patterns of dominance, may also be the means through which existing power relations are entrenched and reproduced" (154). In this way, labeling a project or intervention as participatory can be politically expedient in terms of consolidating power.

White distinguishes between two components of participation, the first regarding *who* participates, with relevant categories being gender, socioeconomic status, and political affiliation, and the second regarding the *extent* of

participation, which regards whether community members are engaged in every aspect of the intervention or simply expected to implement a previously designed project. In further characterizing the dynamics of participation, White identifies four major types of participation: nominal, instrumental, representative, and transformative, which serve different interests for the implementers and community members. Nominal participation is when communities are engaged without any meaningful transfer of power, for the purpose of legitimating prevailing powers and allowing community members to feel included in the process. Instrumental participation is when community members are engaged to complete tasks that are necessary for the intervention to function properly, but are not engaged in the development of the intervention itself. Representative participation is when community members are engaged to represent their own opinions in the process of implementation. Transformative participation is when the practical experience of community members determining the agenda of development strategies transforms them thereby challenging power relations in broader society.

Another critical insight that White offers about participation is that societal power relations are embedded in the model of participation that is implemented and the interests that are served by that model of participation. White states: "However participatory a development project is designed to be, it cannot escape the limitations imposed on this process from the power relations in wider society" (153). Similarly, Connell notes "power relationships reproduce themselves, regardless of how 'participatory' or 'democratic' a setting is, unless a conscious, sustained effort is undertaken to alter them" (251). These observations help to show that participatory processes cannot be considered separately from the political power structures within which they operate. Participation is, in short, inherently political.

In describing genuine participatory approaches, White states, "if participation means that the voiceless gain a voice, we should expect this to bring some conflict. It will challenge power relations, both within any individual project and in wider society" (155). Genuine participation, therefore, challenges existing societal power relations.Connell describes the ideal state of participation by identifying a reciprocal dynamic wherein the knowledge from the community about local conditions and needs is communicated with development agents and knowledge from the outside regarding economic patterns and larger social issues is communicated with community members. Connell emphasizes that, in order to participate more effectively in development strategies for themselves, communities must have access to greater information and tools. He states "participatory development involves more than simply asking people what they want and then providing it, regardless of the probable consequences or the prospects for success" (249). He further states: "People's participation is not only about achieving the more efficient and more equitable distribution of material resources: it is also about the sharing of knowledge and the transformation of the process of learning itself in the service of people's self development" (250).If participation is to foster genuine empowerment, it must involve processes of learning, reflection, and action that facilitate personal and social development. Empowerment, which is when people have more control over resources and decisions that affect them, requires that participation is effective and results in greater accountability for the government (Plan, Monitor, Evaluate). Empowerment, in other words, requires that community members be educated to think and act in ways that allow them to more effectively participate in the development process.

The above review establishes a few premises about participation: genuine participatory processes fundamentally involve a transfer of power, there are a

variety of types of participation that serve various interests, participatory processes reflect and can challenge patterns of power and privilege within a given society or community.

**Figure 1**. Administrative Structure of Decentralization in Uganda, Rural

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┌─────────────────┐              ┌─────────────────┐
│ Ministry of Local│─────────────▶│ District Council │
│   Government     │              │     (LC5)        │
└─────────────────┘              └─────────────────┘
                                          │
                                          ▼
                                 ┌─────────────────┐
                                 │  County Council  │
                                 │     (LC4)        │
                                 └─────────────────┘
                                          │
                                          ▼
                                 ┌─────────────────┐
                                 │   Sub-County     │
                                 │  Council (LC3)   │
                                 └─────────────────┘
                                          │
                                          ▼
                                 ┌─────────────────┐
                                 │     Parish       │
                                 │     (LC2)        │
                                 └─────────────────┘
                                          │
                                          ▼
                                 ┌─────────────────┐
                                 │     Village      │
                                 │     (LC1)        │
                                 └─────────────────┘
```
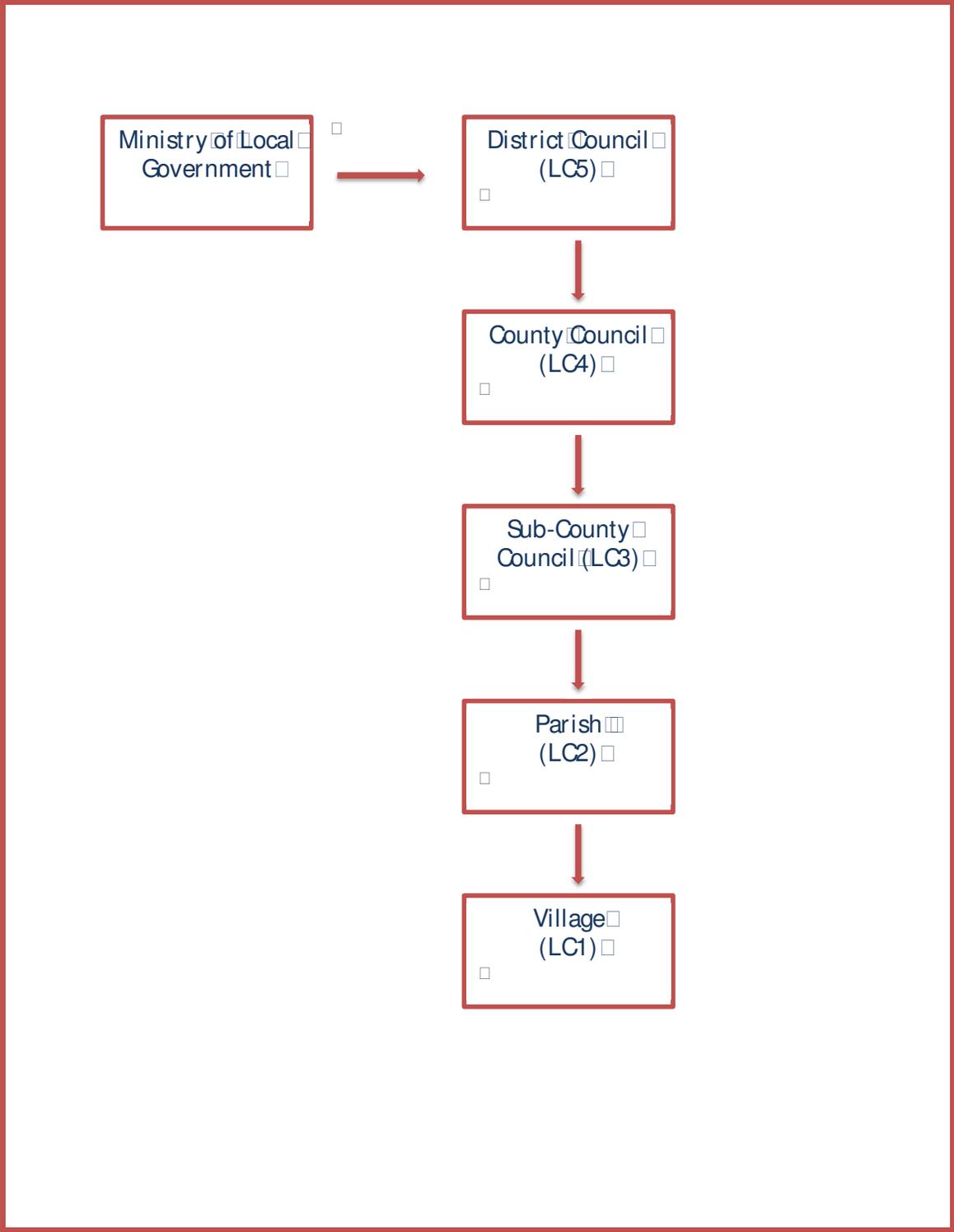
## 2.2 Decentralization and the Participatory Approach in Uganda

Decentralization efforts, which transfer responsibility of procurement, selection of local projects, and identification of beneficiaries from central ministries to local governments, became popular in the developing world beginning in the 1980s. The underlying rational of decentralization schemes is that local governments are more subject to electoral pressures from local citizens and will therefore be able to more effectively implement and monitor delivery than a central authority. Decentralization efforts theoretically offer an alternative to centralized political schemes wherein corruption runs rampant and accountability to local citizens is minimal. The decentralization process in Uganda began in 1987 when the Resistance Councils (RCs) were legalized and given jurisdictional powers through the enactment of the 1987 Resistance Council Statute 9. Through the 1993 Resistance Council Statute, the government initiated an implementation program of decentralization, which was later enshrined in the 1995 Ugandan Constitution (Bashaasha, 2011). The 1995 Constitution states: "the state shall be guided by the principle of decentralization and devolution of governmental functions and powers to the people at appropriate levels where they can best manage and direct their affairs". The Local Government Act of 1997, the principal decentralization law in Uganda, was passed in Uganda in order to align existing law on local governance structures with the 1995 Constitution's principles of devolution and decentralization. The Local Government Act states in its preamble that one of its primary purposes is: "to provide for decentralization at all levels of local governments to ensure good governance and democratic participation in, and control of, decision making by the people." Thus, the principle of citizen participation is clearly articulated in Uganda's Constitution and prevailing law on local governance.

The substantive function of the Local Government Act was to establish an organized system of local governance, which begins at the district level (LC5) and continues down to the village level (LC1), and devolves power and responsibilities to these councils in areas such as: finance, legislation, politics, planning, and personnel matters (see figure 1). District councils have autonomy over primary and secondary education, primary health services, and basic services in water provision, roads, planning, and licensing. Each district has the authority to formulate, approve, and execute its own development plan. Primary education, community-based health services, hygiene, and low-level health units were devolved by districts to lower level councils (Bashaasha, 2011). The Local Government Act also establishes a participatory planning process that begins at the grassroots level and continues through governance structures up the national government. It states, "The district council shall prepare a comprehensive and integrated development plan incorporating plans of lower level local governments for submission to the National Planning Authority and lower level local governments shall prepare plans incorporating plans of lower councils in their respective areas of jurisdiction" (Local Government Act, 1997)

The rationale for governance decentralization was that it would increase local participation and improve representation, therefore allowing communities to more effectively participate in the decision-making and planning processes that affect their lives. This increased and improved participation, it was argued, would lead to improved service delivery by ensuring that the government was providing services that were responsive to community needs. Five significant objectives of the Local Government Act were to: transfer genuine power to district officials, reducing the workload of central government officials; increase political and administrative control over services at the local level, improving accountability, effectiveness, and promoting community ownership; allow local

leaders to develop organization structures and programs suited to local circumstances; improve financial accountability by clearly connecting the payment of taxes and the delivery of services; improve the capacity of local councils to plan, finance, and implement service delivery. The three broad goals of the decentralization process were to achieve: (1) political and legislative empowerment of the people, (2) fiscal devolution, and (3) control of the administrative machinery by the local councils (Bashaasha, 2011). While the decentralization scheme has been praised internationally, some scholars have argued that it has failed to produce the sort of community empowerment and socioeconomic transformation associated with genuine participatory processes.

One comprehensive evaluation of Uganda's decentralization system in terms of rural service delivery found that decentralization had generally resulted in increased participation and control over service delivery and governance in local communities. However, this examination also found that local governments were unable to more effectively implement and deliver services due to inadequate financial resources at the local level, inability to attract and retain and skilled, professional technical and political leaders, and corruption, nepotism and elite capture (Bashaasha, 2011).

Local governments in Uganda utilize four types of funding: local revenues, government grants, donor funds for specific activities, and general fundraising. Of these four, local governments rely mostly on grants from the central government. Prior to the abolishment of Graduated Taxes, which contributed 80 percent of local revenue, local governments were less reliant on grants from the central government, which come primarily in the form of conditional grants. Conditional grants represented up to 85% of local government revenue in 1999/2000. These conditional grants only allow for a small degree of flexibility for the local government and are used for services that

are determined by the central government. Unlike the conditional grants, the graduated taxes allowed local governments to pursue local priority projects, and subsequent efforts of the central government (CG) to compensate for their abolishment, such as the local service tax and local hotel tax, have been unproven in their success (Bashaasha, 2011).

The transfer of power to local political leaders also provides new avenues for corruption. Local political leaders, empowered with the procurement and distribution of key services to their constituents, have the capacity to award service contracts to friends, family, and political allegiants. Institutional and legal frameworks designed to promote accountability are weak, due to insufficient financial management, procurement, and audit systems. Some scholars have commented on the devolution of corruption to the local level, saying, "in many instances, it is local elites rather than the most vulnerable that capture decentralized power" (Naidoo, 2002). Naidoo, in comparing decentralization of education in several sub-Saharan African countries, states "decentralization creates intermediate levels of power which are accountable not to the grassroots they are supposed to serve but to the central authority or their own institutional interests" (2002).

Another scholarly evaluation of the decentralization process in Uganda finds that state power has been reconsolidated and that the failures of the decentralization process to transform or meaningfully alter power relations lie in the unstated motives of the government in initiating the decentralization process. Muhumuza contends that, while the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government was initially enthusiastic about the prospect of devolving and decentralizing state power, the transition from a 'no-party' political system to a partisan political system has reversed the initial gains of decentralization and recentralized power with the central government. In the context of Uganda,

Mahumuza argues that the decentralization strategy was implemented to recentralize power in the Central Government in response to the growth of grassroots citizen organizations addressing issues that the government was incapable of during the political turmoil of the 1970s and 1980s. Muhumuza also cites the significant public administration costs of the creation of numerous local governments as an explanation of the failures of the decentralization process in Uganda. The public administration sector remained the second highest cost sector, after education, between 2002/03 and 2005/06 (2008).

While Muhumuza recognizes that the motives for African leaders to engage in decentralization processes varied (from increasing or maintaining donor contributions to genuine empowerment), he argues that these processes were fundamentally political manipulations used by authoritarian leaders to increase legitimacy and access international aid. Despite formal emphasis on democratic governance, service delivery, and community participation, Mahumuza notes, "the underlying motive is consolidation of power". The end result, Mahumuza argues, is an institutional framework for the decentralization and devolution of state power without the reality of meaningful power transfer. Behind these structures of democratic, participatory governance, Muhumuza argues, is a powerful neopatrimonial system wherein patronage is used to access political legitimacy and support. Muhumuza emphasizes the lack of autonomy for local governments and the presence of upward accountability, citing fiscal dependence that is due to a lack of local revenue sources, control of staff payment by the central government, and liaisons between the NRM political leaders and local political leaders as examples of the recentralization trend in Uganda (2008). Muhumuza concludes: "the adoption of decentralization reforms by Museveni's NRM government in Uganda cannot be disassociated from the vested interests of legitimizing the regime, forging democratic credentials for

purposes of accessing aid, as well as building grassroots patronage networks to entrench the regime" (2008).

A final evaluation of Uganda's decentralization systemfocuses on the participatory mechanisms embedded in the decentralization structure and how those mechanisms have facilitated the process of rural development. The study finds that, while there has been increased citizen participation and representation, these human development achievements have failed to result in increased empowerment and transformed socioeconomic realities for poor and marginalized rural Ugandans (Kakumba, 2010). The author distinguishes between the concepts of participation and empowerment, arguing that empowerment "requires a process through which people's freedom of choice and action is expanded to enable people to have more control over resources and decisions that affect them" (173). Kakumba further argues that, for participation to result in empowerment, it must be effective in the sense that community members are able to ensure accountability of the government. Kakumba evaluates community/resource mobilization, participatory planning, local elections, accountability, poverty reduction strategies, and the creation of new districts as strategies to promote participation and representation. Kakumba provides a variety of factors that explain failure of these methods to result in community empowerment including: prevailing weak socioeconomic structure in rural Uganda, lack of government criticism from CSOs and other NGOs, lack of fiscal autonomy of lower local governments, persistent central government control, local elite capture of power and resources, citizens' lack of sufficient skills and knowledge, a focus on political representation at the expense of socioeconomic transformation, and an institutional design that favors upward accountability. Kakumba says of this trend of upward accountability "the upward accountability trend is enabled by the legislative and operational

framework that still enables the CG to unilaterally determine the overall policy outlook and financial capacity of LGs through central grant transfer, which account for 90 percent of local budgets" (182). Despite the human development benefits of decentralization in Uganda, Kakumba insists that both the local governance structures and the communities they are supposed to represent remain disempowered within the national political environment (2010).

## 2.3 Kibaale District, Uganda Rural Development and Training Programme (URDT), and the Epicenter Strategy

Kibaale District is one of the 112 Districts in Uganda and is located in the Mid-Western part of the country. Geographically, Kibaale is bordered by Lake Albert in the West, Hoima District in the North, Mubende District to the east, Kywegewa District to the southeast, Kyenjojo District and Kabarrole District to the southwet, and Ntoroko District to the west. The district headquarters, in Kibaale, are located approximately 219 kilometers west of Kampala. The district covers a total area of approximately 4,400 square kilometers, 319 of which are covered by water bodies. Kibaale District consists of three counties: Buyaga County, Bugangaizi County, and Buyanja County with 20 subcounties. Kibaale is one of the five districts in the Bunyoro sub-region among Bulisa District, Hoima District, Kiryandongo District, and Masindi District. The 1900 Uganda Agreement defined the borders of Buganda Kingdom including important areas of Bunyoro south and east of the Kafu River and this area became known as the "Lost Counties". In 1964 Buyaga and Bugangaizi counties, which constitute present-day Kibaale District, were given to the Bunyoro Kingdom. In addition to the history of land conflict in Kibaale District, there is also the presence of a diverse set of ethnic and tribal groups. There are 32 registered ethnic groups in Kibaale district, and only half of the population isBanyoro. The remaining groups include the Bachiga, Bafumbira, Bayankole, Bafumbo, and Bakongo that

have relocated to Kibaale District from more densely populated areas with less available arable land. Agriculture is the main economic activity in the district, although only 12% of arable land is currently utilized. Most farmers in the district engage in subsistence production of food crops such as sweet potatoes, cassava, millet, beans, bananas, and groundnuts. There are 56 Civil Society Organizations  (CSOs) operating in Kibaale District to address issues of community and social development (Kibaale District).

A prominent organization in Kibaale District is The Uganda Rural Development and Training Programme (URDT), a non-profit organization that was founded in 1987 "to address the missing link in development programmes" by combining functional education programs, community consciousness raising initiatives, skills training, and rural development interventions. URDT focuses on empowering marginalized rural communities in Uganda through three primary strategies: educational institutions, training and extensions services, and a community radio station (About Us).

URDT operates three educational institutions: the URDT Girls School, a primary and secondary school that utilizes a two-generation approach to education and employs both the national curriculum and a change agent curriculum; the URDT Institute for Vocational Training and Youth Leadership, which seeks to increase economic empowerment for young men and women by providing two year vocational courses that improve long-term skills, such as business management, and short-term skills, such as bricklaying and baking; and the African Rural University (ARU), an all-women's university which focuses on rural transformation as a profession, teaching students various techniques to empower communities in a holistic way (URDT's Programme Domains).

In terms of training and extension services, URDT offers a variety of courses including: rural farming for business, which is designed for farmers and youth

who dropped out of school and is focused on creating rural entrepreneurs who contribute to the rural economy; sustainable agriculture, which is focused on establishing farmer cooperatives and linking them to regional markets and international fair trade agreements; and non-farm vocational skills training which is focused on developing employable skills in youth that they can use in rural settings to generate income (URDT'S Programme Domains)

Lastly, URDT operates the KagadiKibaale Community Radio Station (KKCR 91.7 FM), which broadcasts 18 hours per day in 7 local languages and English. The aim of this radio station is to serve as a platform for dialogue between development actors, to publicize educational programmes, and to provide a space for marginalized people to share their experiences and opinions. KKCR 91.7 broadcasts policy debates, two-generation dialogues, and interactive educational programmes that focus on topics such as income generation, health, and indigenous knowledge (URDT's Programme Domains)

URDT's considerable and diverse programmatic activities are undergirded by an equally well-developed methodological and organizational vision, which is aptly summarized by their motto: "Awakening the Sleeping Genius in each of us". URDT's activities are based on five fundamental premises: (1) the people of Uganda are central to the success of their own development, (2) lasting change only occurs when people shift from being passive reactors to being agents of change, (3) a shared vision can overcome traditional barriers such as gender, religion, and tribe,  (4) all people, regardless of their circumstances, have inherent strength and power that must be utilized to transform their lives, (5) the agenda for rural transformation must emphasize training, education, and information sharing. These ideals pervade all of the work of URDT (Working Premises).

URDT aims to catalyze integrated, self-generating development using both the visionary approach and community learning and systems thinking. The

visionary approach facilitates genuine democratic participation by rural people in the entire rural development process from planning to implementation by encouraging their ownership and leadership of the development process. The visionary approach recognizes that rural people are protagonists in the development process and that they are repositories of knowledge and information that can used to improve their livelihoods, it encourages rural people to identify the things that are important to them, to formulate a vision of what they would like to create, and allows the tension between their vision and their current reality to motivate action and transformation. The visionary approach also requires that communities learn knowledge and skills that will allow them to more effectively participate in and determine the development process (Working Premises).

The systems-thinking component of the URDT approach emphasizes the relationships that exist between development concerns such as health, education, gender relations, and the environment. This approach recognizes that genuine rural transformation requires multi-sector, collaborative initiatives that address the root causes of underdevelopment and that promote balanced development in all sectors of society (Working Premises).

One recently initiated strategy of URDT is the Epicenter Strategy. The Epicenter Vision states: "Every village in Kibaale district and ultimately Africa has at least one woman who is a specialist in catalyzing rural transformation from within the communities. She works with Community Based Epicenters enabling the people starting from each individual in that community to be in the drivers' seat of their own development." The Epicenter Strategy aims to increase the capacity of political and technical leadership at the local level as well as community members to design and implement development strategies suited to local conditions. It does so by placing one professional woman who has been

trained in the Visionary Approach through the African Rural University (ARU) in each sub-county. This woman, known as an Epicenter Manager, works extensively with local leadership, community-based organizations, and community members to promote community driven development by increasing the capacity of all groups to envision and implement effective development interventions. The Epicenter strategy has the following methodological focuses: Mastery of the principles of the creative process, whereby individuals are more aware of their aspirations, values, vision, and current reality, mastery of systems thinking, whereby individuals understand the connection between different elements of development, and mastery of sustainable development, whereby different levels of choices are understood (5 Year Strategy Plan).

The Epicenter managers work in partnership with the sub-county local government and lead community members through courses in the Creative Process at the individual, family, and village level. The products of the Epicenter managers' work with the community are visions and action plans for development at the family and village level. The Epicenter manager shares the priorities and needs that community members have identified through participation in local government meetings and planning processes. Beyond this, the Epicenter manager supports existing community-based organizations, such as farmer cooperatives and savings and credit cooperatives (SACCOs), by serving as a resource mobilizer and organizational consultant. In practice, the Epicenter manager identifies potential sources of funds and other support for organizations, attends and organizes meetings, and increases the capacity of community members to sustain and develop these organizations. The Epicenter additionally assists with the establishment of new community-based organizations and helps to sustain their work. When the Epicenter's were established, the Chief Executive Officer of URDT signed a memorandum of

understanding with each sub-county chief, which was witnessed by the local council chairman. The sub-county local government provides office space and a working environment for the Epicenter Manager. There are currently Epicenter Managers in 16 sub-counties in Kibaale District: Kagadi, Ruteete, Kyanaisoke, Kabamba, Kyakabadiima, Muhorro, Burora, Mabaale, Pachwa, Nalweyo, Kasmbya, Bwanswa, Matale, Mugarama, Nyamarunda, and Rugashari (5 Year Strategy Plan).

## 3. Justification

The Epicenter strategy represents a direct collaboration between a non-profit organization and sub-county local governments and therefore represents an unparalleled opportunity to examine the effectiveness of the participatory mechanisms embedded in the decentralized governance structure for rural communities in Uganda. Partnering with the Epicenter Managers and the broader URDT organization allowed the researcher to gather the perspectives of diverse stakeholders, including community members and government officials, in the process of rural development. Furthermore, URDT has a clearly articulated methodological strategy and organizational vision that aspires to community empowerment and genuine, meaningful participation, both related to the stated central goals of governance decentralization in Uganda. Partnering with an organization that has over 25 years of experience working in rural development strategies and that has initiated a partnership with the local government gave the researcher access to an impressive body of institutional knowledge regarding rural development strategies, community empowerment and capacity building, and the role of the local governments in stimulating rural development.

The substantial size of the rural population in Uganda helps to justify the focus on rural development and communities. Approximately 84.4% of Uganda's

population lives in rural areas according to national data from 2011 (CIA World Factbook).Given the concentration of the Ugandan population in rural areas as well as the prevalence of economic, social, and environmental insecurity in these areas, the improvement of human and economic development indicators in rural Uganda should be central to the broader national development agenda. Furthermore, given the historical exploitation and relative deprivation of rural communities, national efforts for participatory processes and community empowerment are of the utmost importance in terms of transforming these communities and providing expanded freedom and opportunity.

## 4. Statement of Objectives

1. The broad objective of this project is to understand the extent to which the participatory planning framework established in the Local Government Act of 1997 is utilized and to what extent it encourages and results in genuine community empowerment for rural communities.

2. More specifically, this project aims to understand the extent of genuine citizen participation by assessing the degree to which community members feel that they are empowered to participate in strategies for rural development at all levels of the government.

3. Additionally, this project aims to understand whether or not there is a discrepancy between the vision for rural development held by rural community members and the vision for rural development expressed in *Uganda Vision 2040*.

4. This project aims to understand the theoretical underpinnings of participatory approaches to development as well as the components or indicators of genuinely participatory processes

5. This project seeks to explore the position that the Epicenter Managers have within the participatory framework established for rural development with a particular focus on if and how they stimulate

genuine, meaningful community participation in the formation, implementation, and evaluation of rural development policies

## 5. Methods

The researcher spent approximately four weeks living in five sub-counties in Kibaale District: Burora, Kabamba, Mugarama, Muhorro, and Pachwa. The researcher rotated between these subcounties, spending four to five days living in each. In these sub-counties the researcher was hosted by the Epicenter Manager and lived in the midst of the community she was studying. This sort of living arrangement, wherein the researcher was immersed in every aspect of daily life in rural, Western Uganda- from manually washing clothes to trudging through muddy roads- allowed for the most meaningful kind of learning and for the researcher to pursue a variety research methods. The researcher relied on three primary research methods: semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. The questionnaires used for the interviews and the focus groups centered on the extent of community participation in government-supported rural development, the effectiveness of existing rural development strategies, and the causes of and potential solutions to rural underdevelopment. The researcher had a total of 116 participants, 72 of these participants were interviewed through focus groups while the remaining 44 participants were interviewed during individual sessions. While the vast majority of interviewees and focus group participants were community members, the researcher also interviewed key government officials at the sub-county level and the Epicenter Managers themselves. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in a variety of settings including: the subcounty local government headquarters, the Epicenter Managers' homes, and homes of the interviewees. The location of the interviews and focus groups did not appear to

have a significant effect on the quality or duration of the interviews and focus groups.

## 5.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

The primary research method used in relation to the central research objectives was the semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview is the core of good Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) methods and the researcher relied on it as a strategy to obtain specific information and data. The semi-structured interview is one in which the researcher prepares a set of questions in advance, but allows themself to be open to new information and follow up with questions that they had not prepared in advance. For this project, the researcher prepared three questionnaires for the three categories of participants: community members, government officials, and Epicenter managers.  The greatest advantage of the semi-structured interview is that it allows the researchers to remain open and clarify information or issues that they had not anticipated when preparing the interview questions. This is particularly important when researchers are only spending a limited amount of time in the village and may not have had the time or experience to consider all relevant issues. An additional advantage of the semi-structured interview is that it allows the researchers to hone in on specific issues of relevance to the research project. The semi-structured interview, in essence, allows the researcher to strike a careful balance between specificity and openness that is suitable for researchers who only have a limited amount of time. The semi-structured interview also allowed the researcher to effectively operate within the more unpredictable daily schedule of rural life. If the interviewee needed to hurry to get home to prepare supper or if rain was on the way, the researcher was able to alter the interview, omitting certain questions, in order to expedite the process. Particularly in an environment in which many people did

not speak English or did so with only basic proficiency, the semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to clarify questions that the interviewee or interpreter did not understand by asking them in a different way or choosing one aspect of the question to focus on.

While the semi-structured interview was a singularly effective research method for this project, there were, of course, some challenges. Most of the interviews were conducted with the assistance of an interpreter, the Epicenter Manager. There were no significant challenges with the interpretation services offered by the Epicenter Manager. One slight challenge to the interpretation services was that the questionnaires were altered in the first week of interviews. The Epicenter Managers had been made familiar with the initial questionnaire and original research questions. As such, they did not initially have as strong of an understanding of the interview questions and underlying research objectives that would have allowed them to communicate questions in a way consistent with the intent. As such, the researcher sometimes had to explain the Epicenter Manager the importance of certain key words that may not have seemed as central to the Epicenter Manager. If the researcher had taken more time to thoroughly explain her research project with the Epicenter Managers and its objectives, the interpreters would have been much more able to easily understand and convey the meaning of each question.

As with any communication that is executed through an interpreter, there is the almost certain risk that some meanings may be lost in translation. While there are no confirmed examples that the detail of response was reduced through translation, it is generally accepted that researchers lose some level of detail when they communicate via interpretation. Even with interpretation services, language proved to be a significant barrier during this research project. Some government officials at the subcounty level were resistant to engage in the

interview because they did not feel comfortable speaking English, but did not want to be interpreted for. Similarly, some community members insisted on engaging in their interview using English even when they were not sufficiently comfortable with English to understand or respond to the questions adequately. As a result, those interviews tended to be of lower quality in terms of the information provided than when participants used the language they were most comfortable with. Furthermore, many of the questions that the researcher had prepared in advance had to be simplified to facilitate understanding of the interviewees and interpreters.

## 5.2 Focus Group Discussions

Another significant research method that the researcher employed was the focus group. The focus groups were conducted with community members and used to capture a diversity of perspectives as well as to increase the number of community members who were interviewed. The researcher completed one focus group in BuroraSubcounty with women from a women's savings and credit cooperative; three focus groups in PachwaSubcounty with men from a cocoa growing cooperative and men and women from two farmer's cooperative; two focus groups in KabambaSubcounty with youth and a rural development community organization; and three focus groups in MugaramaSubcounty with men, women, and a youth group. The instruments used for these focus groups were the same as the semi-structured interviews- questionnaires that focused on the extent of community participation in government-supported rural development, the effectiveness of existing rural development strategies, and the causes of and potential solutions to rural underdevelopment. Perhaps the most significant benefit of the focus groups is that they allowed the interviewer to access a greater number of community members than she would have been able

to if she had only completed individual interviews. The increased number of community members ideally increased the diversity of perspectives that the researcher was able to access. These groups ensured that the interviewer got the perspective of women, youth, and men, of farmers and businessmen, of the well educated and those who had never completed primary school. Another advantage of the focus group is that it allows the focus group participants to feel more comfortable and confident than they likely would if they were being interviewed individually. The result is more vibrant, vivid, and candid comments that are not as filtered through their perception of what the interviewer would like to hear.

For all of the advantages of the focus groups, there were also some significant constraints. One of the most important constraints was the lack of gender equality in terms of participation. If both genders were present during a focus group, women were much less likely to participate than men. After being prompted by the researcher and the interpreter, one or two women would act as representatives for women, usually answering a few questions, whereas participation from the men was much more widespread, generally with each man answering each question. This disparity in terms of participation was also present when focus groups were divided by gender. The women focus groups tended to have shorter answers to the questions, more concentrated participation, and to be more reluctant to answer questions at all. Despite efforts to increase the participation of women in these focus groups, the researcher was never fully able to equalize participation.

Another limitation of the focus group methodology is that, in a group setting, participants may feel pressure from their peers or fear being judged and adjust their answers to whatever they think is more acceptable to the people around them. This risk is compounded in a focus group that is essentially run by

a translator, as there could be many side conversations going on that the researcher is completely unaware of. This fact highlights the fundamental difference between interviews and focus groups, regardless of whether a translator is involved, which is that the researcher has less control. Even when the researcher prepares a set of questions in advance, the focus group setting allows for these questions to inspire the participants to extend the conversation or consider different questions. This lack of control has both benefits, such as increased candidness, and weaknesses, such as compromised accuracy.

## 5.3 Participant Observation

Participant observation was also an invaluable research method used throughout the study. As practiced under RRA methods, observation requires that the researcher maintain a critical self-awareness of their own biases and attempt to correct for and acknowledge these biases. Given that the researcher had the opportunity to live in the villages that she was researching, she was able to engage in participant observation as a part of her daily life. These quotidian tasks, such as peeling vegetables or manually washing clothes, while minor in comparison to the daily work of many rural people, allowed the researcher to gain a concrete, personal appreciation of the difficulties and challenges of rural life. Furthermore, direct observation of things such as educational facilities and practices, health facilities, and rural infrastructure allowed the researcher to fully understand the resources available to the rural communities to meet their most basic needs. These observations and experiences gradually shaped and helped to illustrate the real-life consequences and reality of the researcher's study.

The greatest advantage of observation as a research methodology is that is relatively easy to engage in independently. The researcher was able to engage in observation at all times, whether she was accompanied by a guide or interpreter

or not. Observation was also useful in that it often piqued the curiosity of the researcher, shaping and reforming the research questions that frame this research project. The major drawback of observation was that the biases and cultural perspectives of the researchers inevitably tainted it. This reality meant that the researcher may have seen or not seen patterns and trends that were based more on her cultural perspectives than the actuality of life in the village. True to RRA methods, the researcher attempted to control for and acknowledge these biases whenever possible to increase the accuracy of her observations.

## 5.4 General Challenges

Perhaps the greatest challenge and shortcoming of the methodology utilized for this research project was the failure to create a representative sample. Due to the limited amount of time available in each subcounty, the researcher was unable to create a random, representative sample. The community members and government officials who were chosen to participate in interviews or focus groups were overwhelmingly people who were already engaged in development-focused initiatives or organizations. These people, while well informed and civically engaged, may not be representative of the general population in their communities. The researcher did take initiative to increase the diversity of the sample in other ways by trying to balance genders, ages, tribal affiliations, and occupations. However, these efforts were not adequate to make the sample representative. The sampling bias of this research project is a serious shortcoming that should be addressed in future research surrounding the same issues.

The scarcity of time in each community also meant that the researcher was unable to engage in many informal conversations with community members (language barrier aside). These informal conversations, which take place with

people from all different backgrounds, help to provide researchers with a greater context for their research and the community in which they are doing research. These informal conversations are particularly helpful in terms of illustrating community perspectives outside of the formal framework of an interview, in which participants may feel constrained or nervous. Informal interviews can be more elucidating than formal interviews due to the freedom and comfort that the participants may feel, but the researcher was unable to facilitate many of them due both to the lack of time and to a significant language barrier.

One final shortcoming of the integrated methodology used for this research project was that the researcher was unable to observe the rural development process in action. The researcher did not attend any consultative meetings between the lower local governments and community members, witness meetings of the sub-county staff discussing development issues or strategies, or observe sub-county government officials communicating the needs of their constituents to the district level government. While the researcher was able to indirectly gain insight into these processes by centering interview questions on this process, being able to witness these processes would have deepened the researcher's understanding of these processes significantly.

## 6. Ethics Statement

This project is designed to meet or exceed the ethical standards of the School of
International Training (SIT) and the Local Review Board (LRB). The researcher's responsibility to the people and communities being studied was always acknowledged, taken seriously, and given priority over any other concerns. The dignity and privacy of the community being studied was given serious consideration at all stages of the research process. The right of interviewees,

focus group participants, and other human subjects to remain anonymous or reveal their identity was clearly communicated to them prior to the session and reiterated at the end of each session. The researcher took all necessary precautions to maintain the anonymity of those who wish to protect their identity. The researcher informed all community members of her intent and the nature of her research project. The researcher has correctly cited all sources and will not misrepresent any work that is not her own. All interviewees and research participants were given the opportunity to offer verbal consent and permission to reveal personal information prior to the interview or focus group. This request for verbal consent was translated into the local language when necessary. Interviewees were made fully aware that they were free to skip questions that they are not comfortable answering, to speak off the record, or to stop the interview if they feel uncomfortable.

# 7. Findings and Discussion

## 7.1 Effectiveness of Participatory Mechanisms and Community Empowerment

"The structural arrangement shows that there is a bottom up approach, through decentralization, but in actual sense it is not because most of the policies are being made by people on the top. It's not working the way it is organized."

-Foundation for Rural Development Focus Group Participant, KabamaSubcounty

The researcher attempted to determine the effectiveness of participatory processes embedded in the decentralized governance structure by assessing the degree to which community members feel empowered to participate in the process for rural development.    Four of the twelve questions in the questionnaire for community members focused on the ascertaining the

degree to which they felt that they and their community were empowered. These questions were:

1. What are the most important reasons that explain why many rural communities in Uganda are underdeveloped?
2. Do you feel that the Ugandan government is adequately supporting rural development?
3. Do you think that efforts for rural development supported by the government should be top down or bottom up?
4. Do you feel that efforts for rural development currently supported by the government are top down or bottom up?

Question one was the broadest attempt to assess community members' perceptions of participation and empowerment. The intent of this question was to determine if community members, without any prompting, would identify lack of participation or empowerment within the development process as an explanation for underdevelopment in rural areas. In fact, none of the respondents explicitly stated lack of participation or empowerment as an explanation for underdevelopment. The range of responses to this question was extensive and represents a variety of often divergent understandings of rural development. The three most common responses to this question were: low education levels and access to quality educational facilities, representing approximately 11% of the responses, lack of cooperation between community members, representing approximately 10% of the responses, embezzlement and corruption, representing approximately 8% of the responses, and poor health and lack of health facilities, representing approximately 8% of the responses. Lack of access to agricultural markets, jealousy, and lack of knowledge were also very common answers, representing 7% of the responses respectively.

While these responses do not reveal recognition by community members that lack of participation and community empowerment sustain and exacerbate patterns of rural underdevelopment, they do demonstrate that there is a lack of capacity building that is central to genuine participatory processes. Connell's statement that participation is "about the sharing of knowledge and the transformation of the process of learning itself in the service of people's self development" suggests that any genuinely participatory process will include an education and capacity building component that allows community members to more effectively participate in the process for development (Connell, 1997). The emphasis of community members on low education and lack of cooperation reveal that rural people have had limited access to the capacity building processes that would enable them to effectively participate in the process of rural development with adequate knowledge of development strategies and organizational structures for social change, such as cooperatives. Furthermore, the emphasis of community members on corruption and lack of adequate health facilities or services demonstrate recognition that service delivery in rural areas is inadequate at best. While this recognition rarely produced explicit criticism of the government (only 2 respondents answered poor service delivery and government policies), they do reveal that community members view the provision of essential social services (such as educational facilities, health, and infrastructure) as central to the realization of rural development.

Question two was another indirect means of assessing community members' perceptions of participation and empowerment. The intent of the question was determine if community members would identify gaps in the government's support of rural development efforts and if they would explain those gaps in terms of a lack of participation and empowerment. 61% of the respondents answered that they felt that the government's support of rural

development efforts was adequate. The most common explanation for this assessment was the existence of the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS) program, with approximately 33% of the respondents who stated that the government's efforts were adequate choosing that answer. Another common explanation was that the government allowed non-government organizations (NGOs), which are often seen as more effective at facilitating rural development, to operate freely, with about 17% of respondents choosing that explanation. The fact that the clear majority of respondents believe that the government's efforts for and support of rural development initiatives are adequate was quite surprising in light of the conspicuous signs of underdevelopment and low quality and accessibility of crucial social services apparent through the district. The researcher suspects that interpretation errors, which omitted the presence of the word 'adequately', may have contributed to these responses.

For the 39% of the respondents who replied that the government's efforts were not adequate, the primary explanation was that resources never made it all the way to the grassroots, with 60% of those respondents choosing that answer. The suggestion of these responses being that there is widespread elite capture, whereby resources intended to benefit poor, rural communities are misappropriated by governmental officials and their allies as it is distributed from the central government to lower local governments. A variation of this response was that the benefits that do make it these communities are shared with community members who are already well off. Multiple respondents gave the example of NAADS in which agricultural inputs and training are shared with rural agriculturalists to improve agricultural productivity in the country. The more profitable agricultural inputs that are offered through the NAADS program are animals, such as milking cows, pigs, and poultry. Community members noted that these more beneficial agricultural inputs are shared with farmers to

already have these animals and are therefore not distributed to community members who are in greater need of income generating activities. While the explicit explanation of lack of participation was only provided by one respondent, the predominate concern with elite capture demonstrates that, for the respondents who are dissatisfied with the government's approach to rural development, political leaders are not held accountable to the people. When rural communities feel that political leaders are free to misuse resources intended for rural development as much as they desire, that indicates an absence of downward accountability, one of the central components of participatory monitoring and evaluation processes and one of the crucial rationales offered for developing a decentralized governance structure in Uganda.

Question three was a direct means of assessing community members' perceptions of participation and empowerment. The intent of the question was to determine if community members valued participatory approaches to development and how they understood the benefits and/or drawbacks of participatory approaches. The results of this question were unambiguous, 97% of the respondents stated that rural development should be a bottom up process while 3% of respondents stated that rural development should combine bottom up and top down processes. 45% of the respondents stated that bottom up approaches are preferable becausepeople know their needs best and are therefore key to development interventions that will be effective in meeting those needs. 29% of respondents stated that bottom up approaches encourage and build ownership of the intervention by the community, ensuring greater sustainability. The remaining 26% of respondents stated that top down approaches promote elite capture and don't adequately deliver services to the grassroots. For the respondents who advocated for a combination of the approaches, they emphasized that the institutional mechanisms that connect rural communities

and the central government, regardless of the direction in which information and input is moving, exhibit widespread channels through which resources and services are misappropriated.

Question four was the most direct means of assessing to what extent community members feel that the participatory mechanisms embedded in the decentralized governance structure are effectively utilized. The results of this question were very mixed; with no one answer having a significant majority. 48% of respondents stated that they felt that the process for government-supported rural development is top down. 42% of these respondents stated that there was an institutional framework for participatory rural development, but that the actuality of rural development was largely top down, with programs that are developed, implemented, and evaluated by people outside of the rural community. 36% of these respondents stated that, while the views of community members were collected through consultative meetings and other methods, they were not practically used to influence strategies. Approximately 9% of respondents answered that rural development was a bottom up process, citing consultative meetings that are carried out with community members and the freedom of NGOs to operate. The remaining 43% of the respondents stated that rural development is currently a bottom up process with many shortcomings. These respondents also emphasized the elite capture of resources and services that occurs along the pathway from the central government to rural communities. What is clear from the distribution of responses is that the overwhelming majority of respondents, approximately 91%, do not feel that the rural development process in Uganda is currently ideally or even effectively bottom up. Some of these community members feel that the process of rural development is top down, while others feel that the framework itself is top down.

These responses reveal that, in terms of effectuating community empowerment, governance decentralization in Uganda has not been particularly effective. The vast majority of respondents in this study did not feel that there were mechanisms in place for them to effectively and meaningfully influence rural development strategies at all levels of the government. Respondents emphasized elite capture and corruption as reasons that rural development processes are not fully participatory. Many respondents commented that, in spite of the institutional framework in place to sustain the participatory approach to development, the input and information that rural communities provided to the government often went unheeded or unimplemented.

Interviews with the government officials help to provide some insight as to why and how the participatory framework formalized with the Local Government Act of 1997 has not been fully and effectively implemented. 50% of the government officials interviewed stated that they felt that the priorities and needs of their constituents had a concrete and meaningful impact on strategies for rural development in higher levels of the government. These officials argued, in other words, that the institutional mechanisms in place to channel needs and ideas from rural people to development administrators are working effectively. The other half of the government officials stated that they felt that, ultimately, the plans for development that they developed with the input of their constituents had no impact on development strategies in higher levels of the government. One official noted that the participatory approach was not utilized because politicians are more invested in power consolidation and reelection than they are in genuine development (Emmanuel, Ssentamu, 2013 Interview)

Responses to the question regarding if they feel that rural development is currently a participatory process were similarly varied for government officials. Two of the respondents stated that the structure for rural development is bottom

up, but the practice is top down, one respondent stated it is a top down process, and one official stated that it is a bottom up process. The varied nature of these responses reveals the lack of consensus regarding the extent and legitimacy of participatory processes embedded in the local governance structure, even among local government officials. Perhaps just as important as the lack of consensus regarding whether rural development processes are participatory is the fact that every government official emphasized the inadequacy of the budget available to them to implement their development plans. Even though government officials at this level do have direct access to the perspective of community members and use those perspectives to design development plans, they have access to an extremely limited budget that is composed primarily of conditional grants from the central government. In this way, implementation of these participatory development plans is severely limited. The subcounty chairperson in Burora commented: "funding is too little, that's why most of the government programs are not implemented very well" (Honorable MugishaFaustien, Interview 2013).

## 7.2 Vision Alignment in Rural Development

One of the central objectives of this research project was to determine if there is a substantive discrepancy between the vision for rural development that community members hold and the vision for rural development that the Ugandan government holds, as demonstrated by *Uganda Vision 2040*. The two strategies used to achieve this objective were to: (1) collect the vision for rural development from local government officials and community members and compare these visions and (2) to share the vision for rural development contained in *Uganda Vision 2040*with community members and gather their responses.

When asked about their vision for rural development, community members shared a range of ideas and priorities. The most common response, representing 30% of the responses, was to have increased access to high quality educational institutions in rural areas. 21% of respondents stated that a developed rural community would have increased cooperation between community members for all aspects of development related work- from agriculture to savings and credit. 16% of respondents stated that a developed rural community would have permanent houses. 14% of respondents stated that a developed rural community would have improved health throughout the community. Similarly, 14% of respondents stated that a developed rural community would have increased agricultural productivity. Other common responses that community members provided were: food security, increased access to improved health facilities, increased educational attainment in the community, improved infrastructure, and improved agricultural knowledge. Government officials provided similar answers when asked about their vision for rural development. The same amount of government officials, 23%, included increased agricultural productivity and improved education in their vision for rural development. 18% of the respondents included improved infrastructure in their vision for rural development and 12% of respondents included improved health in their vision for rural development. Other responses for the government officials included: improved access to clean, safe water, rural electrification, food security, and increased income generating activities. While the vision for rural development held by community members and local government officials are not identical, they do reflect substantively similar values and priorities- namely, education, improved infrastructure, increased access to health services and facilities, increased agricultural productivity, and food security. This component of the analysis- comparing the vision of community members and local

government officials- revealed that the visions that community members and subcounty government officials hold for rural development are roughly aligned. The subcounty government officials appear to be well informed about the challenges that their constituents face and the solutions that they propose to those challenges.

On the other hand, community members did not generally react positively to the vision for rural development contained in the *Uganda Vision 2040.*Participants were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a proposal to shift agriculture from predominantly small-scale, subsistence farming to large-scale commercial farming and reduce the proportion of the population in rural areas in order to clear land for large-scale farms in addition to reducing the number of people that work in agriculture in favor of mechanization. 68% of respondents stated that they did not agree with the proposal, 46% of them insisting that resources should be focused on improving rural communities, not shifting people outside of them. Other respondents focused on the potential of this policy proposal to cause food shortages, increased crime, and increased poverty. The other 32% of respondents stated that they agreed with the policy proposal. 25% of these respondents focused on the increased economic opportunities in urban areas as the basis of their support for the proposal. Similarly, approximately 17% of these respondents stated that moving rural people into urban areas would allow them to interact with many different viewpoints and experiences that would allow for greater innovation.

This component of the analysis revealed a significant conflict between the vision for rural development represented in the national policy framework for development and the vision for rural development held by community members in rural areas. This conflict has a couple of significant implications as it relates to the central research objectives. First, it reflects the dereliction of the participatory

framework in terms of transferring knowledge and opinions from rural communities to the central government. If these opinions were being effectively shared with higher levels of the government, it is likely that the vision for rural development represented in *Uganda Vision 2040* would be substantively different. Secondly, it reflects the ineffectiveness of the participatory framework in terms of imbuing community members with a sense of ownership of the rural development interventions being implemented. The fact that the majority of participants did not agree with the proposal demonstrates that they do not feel as if they are part owners of this project nor do they believe that it is a beneficial proposal. Interviews with government officials and community members revealed that while the needs and opinions of rural constituents are generally being effectively communicated with subcounty level officials, this information is not having a meaningful impact on the national policy framework for development.

## 7.3 The Role of the Epicenter Managers

Another central objective of this research project was to explore the position that the Epicenter Managers have within the participatory framework established for rural development with a particular focus on if and how they stimulate genuine, meaningful community participation in the formation, implementation, and evaluation of rural development policies. The researcher relied on three methods to achieve this objective. Firstly, the researcher underwent a thorough review of existing literature on the Epicenter Strategy, familiarizing herself with the methodology, programmatic design, vision, and objectives of the strategy. Secondly, the researcher asked community members to explain the impact that the Epicenter Managers have made on their community. The intent of this question was to determine, independently of the

methodological framework and institutional expectations, what impact these women are having on the ground in these communities. Lastly, the researcher asked the Epicenter managers to describe their work and the impact that they have had. The intent of this question was to determine how the Epicenter Managers view their work and the accomplishments that they would like to achieve.

The review of literature on the Epicenter Strategy demonstrated that the strategy prioritizes and stimulates the community capacity-building that is necessary for genuinely participatory processes. The Epicenter Strategy aims to increase the capacity of community members as well as political and technical leadership at the local level to design and implement development strategies suited to local conditions. Connell states that development is "a process by which formerly excluded and subordinate social groups not only transform their physical environment, but also gain power over their economic and political environment and over the knowledge, skills, and other resources needed to sustain this transformation" (Connell, 254). Genuinely participatory approaches, in other words, equip community members with the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively participate in and influence the process for rural development. Through the visionary, systems thinking, and sustainable development approaches, in which community members are challenged to develop their own vision for rural development, the Epicenter Managers are directly preparing community members to be able to advocate for themselves and take leadership roles in the process for rural development. The Epicenter Managers provide community members and local government leaders with the technical skills and knowledge necessary to effective develop and implement development interventions that will truly benefit rural communities.

Interviews with community members confirmed the capacity building exercises of Epicenter Managers outlined in the Epicenter Strategy. When asked what impact the Epicenter Managers have had on their community, an equal percentage of respondents, approximately 15% respectively, responded that they have: increased technical agricultural knowledge, increased sensitization about sanitation and hygiene, and facilitated vision creation and implementation. Other common responses were that the Epicenter Managers have: increased cooperation between community members (11%), given people hope (8%), strengthened networks between non-governmental organizations (8%), increased women's participation in development efforts (6%), improved animal rearing techniques (6%), andincreased income generating activities (6%). These responses reveal that the Epicenter Managers are involved in critical activities of consciousness raising, facilitation of greater cooperation and self-organization, knowledge addition, and mindset change. These activities are necessary for preparing a community to be able to participate in and influence rural development strategies being pursued by the government.

Interviews with the Epicenter Managers revealed that they are engaged in the capacity-building activities outlined in the Epicenter Strategy. When asked to describe their main activities, the Epicenter Managers mentioned up scaling the visionary approach to development, resource mobilization, extending URDT services throughout Kibaale District, and creating cooperative networks between community members and organizations in the interest of rural development. Furthermore, the Epicenter Managers described an additional role that they fulfill, which is as a liaison between local government officials and community members. Epicenter Managers work directly with the Sub-County Community Development Officer (CDO) in addition to attending Sub-County meetings and helping to share the vision of community members with government officials.

The Epicenter Managers, in essence, serve as an additional mechanism through which information, knowledge, and opinions of community members can be shared with higher levels of the government. Their role as liaisons between community members and government officials demonstrates direct support of a participatory framework that is not fully functional.

The literature review and interviews revealed that the Epicenter Managers play a critical role in facilitating participatory rural development in spite of the many challenges, such as lack of funding, transportation challenges, and insufficient participation, that they face. Epicenter Managers play two primary roles in stimulating participatory rural development. First, they improve the capacity of community members and local government officials to effectively participate in the process of rural development by improving their skills, knowledge, and level of cooperation. Secondly, they serve as a liaison between community members and local government officials and are able to make sure that the concerns of rural people are not ignored or unrecognized by the people that are supposed to represent them.

## 8. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 8.1 Recommendations

*"It should be emphasized that the quest for citizen participation does not mean that the central government should cease conceiving plans and making development strategies for the rural poor, but rather, strategies such as PEAP should be localized to enlist local opinions, methods, and decision-making in order to attain strong local ownership and empowerment"*
(Kakumba, 2010)

Compelling and practical policy proposals are grounded in thorough and rigorous research. To result in more informed policy proposals the many shortcomings of this particular research project should be addressed with future research. One suggestion for future research is to directly monitor and observe the development planning processes at the Village, Parish, Subcounty, and District level to determine more precise explanations for the disconnect between rural concerns, priorities, and needs and the services that are available to meet them. This research project would be able to offer concrete suggestions as to improving the participatory framework by observing in action. Another suggestion for research is to focus on citizen participation in the development process to determine if there are any significant disparities in terms of participation between different genders, tribes, socioeconomic status, education level, and any other relevant demographic factors. This research project, due primarily to time constraints, was not able to fully determine if citizen participation in the rural development process reflects other social patterns of power and resources. It is very possible that the researcher was unable to observe those dynamics and understanding them is critical to understanding the extent of community empowerment and participation.

Despite the shortcomings of this research project, there are a few policy recommendations that can be made on the basis of these findings. The first, and most obvious, is to create programs similar to the Epicenter Strategy wherein the capacity of community members and local government officials to develop and implement strategies for rural development is strengthened. These programs, like the Epicenter Strategy, should focus on facilitating community members understanding more fully what they would like to see in their community. Unlike the Epicenter Strategy, these programs should also focus on voter education and mobilization. Voter education and mobilization will focus on

make sure that rural communities are aware of their right to participate in processes of development and also are more informed about the political leaders that they elect and make voting decisions that will support their efforts to develop their community. These programs would ensure that rural communities are able to articulate their vision for the future as well as identify potential resources and the action steps necessary to achieve that vision.

A second policy proposal is to initiate monitoring boards for each level of the local government that are composed of members of the lower levels of the government and community members who are appointed by their peers. This would institutionalize the value of downward accountability that is crucial for participatory frameworks to be effectively implemented. Currently, regardless of how poor the district responds to community needs identified by the subcounty government, there are no mechanisms in place for the subcounty government to express dissatisfaction with their efforts. Under the proposed system, these monitoring boards would have the authority to challenge development plans in addition to evaluating the implementation of those development plans. These monitoring boards would operate by sensitizing community members about the development plans in higher levels of the government and providing forums for community members to evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of these development plans.

The final policy proposal, which many scholars examining decentralization have recommended, is to decentralize finances. Under the current system, lower local governments have an extremely limited financial capacity to implement any development plans that they come up with. This capacity was even more limited following the abolishment of the Graduated Tax (GT) system. The challenges of devising an innovative strategy for increasing finances for lower local governments without increasing the tax burden are

significant, but some recommendations are to increase local government fiscal accountability, seek donor funding for capital projects with backing by the central government, as well as increasing financial management skills in the lower local governments.

## 8.2 Conclusion

*"Simply creating decentralized structures or new procedures for participation in planning and administration does not guarantee that they will be effective or that they will generate greater economic growth or greater social equity. Neither do they necessarily imply greater democracy or a change in political and social power relationships."*(Bashaasha, 7)

The primary objective of this research project was to understand the extent to which the decentralization structures formalized by the Local Government Act of 1997 result in genuine community participation and empowerment for rural communities. The researcher chose to focus on the perspectives of community members to gauge whether or not they felt a sense of ownership of prominent government efforts for rural and national development. The researcher also compared the vision for rural development espoused by community members with the vision for rural development espoused by the national government, as represented by *Uganda Vision 2040*. Finally, as means of understanding the role that NGOs play in the decentralized framework, the researcher explored the position that the Epicenter Managers have within the participatory framework established for rural development with a particular focus on if and how they stimulate genuine, meaningful community participation in the formation, implementation, and evaluation of rural development policies.

The major findings of this report, which are derived primarily from interviews and focus groups with community members, government officials,

and Epicenter Managers in 5 subcounties in Kibaale District, reveal that the decentralization structure has failed to result in the expected empowerment, participation, and transformation of rural communities. 91% of respondents either felt that the process of rural development was currently top down or that the institutional framework for participatory rural development was not being fully utilized. Clearly, respondents from these rural communities largely felt that they were not fully involved in the processes of rural development that impact their lives on a daily basis. Furthermore, respondents were largely opposed to the vision of rural development contained in *Uganda Vision 2040.* While the vision for rural development appeared to be shared between community members and subcounty level government officials, the national policy framework for development does not appear to be substantively impacted by the concerns, priorities, and opinions of rural communities. The mechanisms in place to transfer knowledge from rural communities to higher levels of the government are obstructed by a number of forces including most importantly: elite capture, whereby political leaders at various levels siphon off resources that are allocated for rural development, corruption, whereby political leaders use patronage systems to gain support as opposed to pursuing development strategies for the entire community, lack of effective participation by community members, and a lack of adequate fiscal resources for lower local governments.

The researcher also found, more hopefully, that the Epicenter Managers are playing a critical role in promoting participatory rural development by increasing the capacity of community members and local government officials to develop, implement, and monitor development initiatives that are suited to the needs of the community and that will transform the reality of rural life. The sort of methodology applied to rural transformation through the Epicenter Strategy represents a promising intervention to revive the failed system of participatory

rural development embedded in the decentralized governance structure.

However these sorts of interventions, which are borne of and supported by the hard work and dedication of community members, represent only a part of the solution. The government of Uganda, which initiated the process of decentralization and is ultimately responsible for the welfare of its most disadvantaged citizens, must take a leading role in efforts to truly empower rural communities.

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## 10. Appendices

### 10.1 Maps of Kibaale District



Map 1. Population density by sub-co...
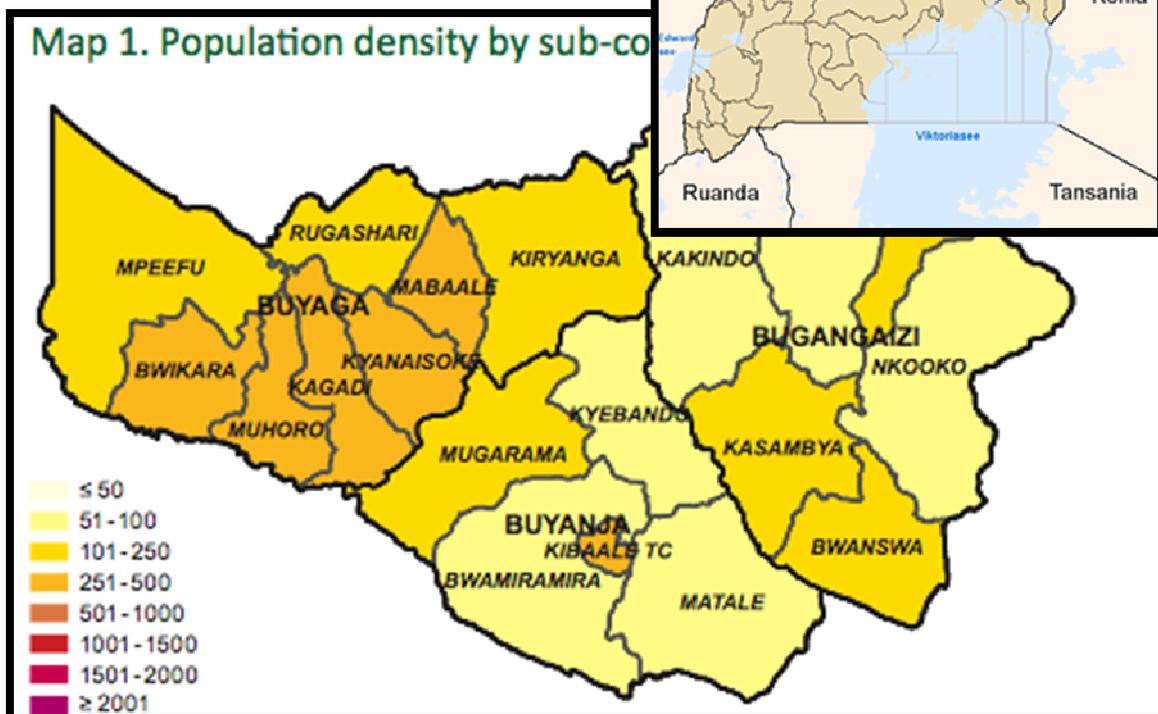
## 10.2 List of Interviewees

| Name | Gender | Age | Subcounty | Type of Interview |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ByanhangaBenom | M | 33 | Burora | Community |
| Deni | M | 41 | Burora | Community |
| Sarah | F | 42 | Burora | Community |
| ManiragabaDeo | M | 40 | Burora | Community |
| Bakine Mary | F | 58 | Burora | Community |
| NyirakubanzaConsesa | F | 50 | Burora | Community |
| KatusabeGoreti | F | 35 | Burora | Community |
| KyalimpaRestatuta | F | 23 | Burora | Community |
| Kwizera Susan | F | 20 | Burora | Community |
| Halerimana Vincent | M | 42 | Burora | Community |
| Kwizera Emmanuel Honorable | M | | Burora | Government |
| MugishaFaustien | M | | Burora | Government |
| Charles SsekiwereAraali | M | 32 | Burora | Community |
| Kweezi Emmanuel | M | 32 | Burora | Community |
| Bategeka Constant | F | 40 | Burora | Community |
| Joseph Byaruhanga | M | 32 | Pachwa | Community |
| Byamukama Edward | M | 39 | Pachwa | Community |
| KagoroDonsio | M | 65 | Pachwa | Community |
| Katwesige Vasco | M | 42 | Pachwa | Community (FG1) |
| KasaijaMatia | M | 37 | Pachwa | Community (FG1) |
| Ndora Constant | M | 39 | Pachwa | Community (FG1) |
| BazibuEriab | M | 36 | Pachwa | Community (FG1) |
| Woman 1 | F | | Pachwa | Community (FG2) |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Woman 2 | F | | Pachwa | Community (FG2) |
| Woman 3 | F | | Pachwa | Community (FG2) |
| Woman 4 | F | | Pachwa | Community (FG2) |
| Woman 5 | F | | Pachwa | Community (FG2) |
| Woman 6 | F | | Pachwa | Community (FG2) |
| Woman 7 | F | | Pachwa | Community (FG2) |
| Woman 8 | F | | Pachwa | Community (FG2) |
| Woman 9 | F | | Pachwa | Community (FG2) |
| Man 1 | M | | Pachwa | Community (FG2) |
| Man 2 | M | | Pachwa | Community (FG2) |
| Man 3 | M | | Pachwa | Community (FG2) |
| Man 4 | M | | Pachwa | Community (FG2) |
| Man 5 | M | | Pachwa | Community (FG2) |
| Man 6 | M | | Pachwa | Community (FG2) |
| Byomuhangi Kenneth | M | 27 | Pachwa | Community |
| FaustineAsaaba | F | 37 | Pachwa | Community (FG3) |
| Byamugisha Felix | M | 48 | Pachwa | Community (FG3) |
| TibemonyaSyril | M | 54 | Pachwa | Community (FG3) |
| Ndagano Edward | M | 39 | Pachwa | Government |
| Tumwebaze Emmanuel | M | | Kabamba | Government |
| Godfrey Balijwaha | M | 22 | Kabamba | Community (FG1) |
| Namusisi Rosemary | F | 18 | Kabamba | Community (FG1) |
| Byoruhanga James | M | 20 | Kabamba | Community (FG1) |
| Nkwhisibwe Edson | M | 19 | Kabamba | Community (FG1) |
| MoizeMusambi | M | 18 | Kabamba | Community (FG1) |
| Byamukama Andrew | M | 19 | Kabamba | Community (FG1) |
| Man 1 | M | | Kabamba | Community (FG2) |
| Man 2 | M | | Kabamba | Community (FG2) |
| Man 3 | M | | Kabamba | Community (FG2) |
| Man 4 | M | | Kabamba | Community (FG2) |
| Man 5 | M | | Kabamba | Community (FG2) |
| Man 6 | M | | Kabamba | Community (FG2) |
| Man 7 | M | | Kabamba | Community (FG2) |
| Ssentamu Emmanuel | M | | Kabamba | Government |
| Byaruhanga Godfrey | M | 50 | Kabamba | Community |
| Tukahurwa Livingston | M | 31 | Kabamba | Community |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Man 1 | M | | Kabamba | Community (FG3) |
| Man 2 | M | | Kabamba | Community (FG3) |
| Man 3 | M | | Kabamba | Community (FG3) |
| Man 4 | M | | Kabamba | Community (FG3) |
| Man 5 | M | | Kabamba | Community (FG3) |
| ByaruhandaVallence | M | | Kabamba | Government |
| SsenzogaDegrasius | M | 58 | Kabamba | Community |
| NyakaisikiOmuheraza | F | 40 | Kabamba | Community |
| OmuherazaNabasa | F | 50 | Kabamba | Community |
| KachimbiiriAugustin | M | | Kabamba | Government |
| Man 1 | M | | Mugarama | Community (FG1) |
| Man 2 | M | | Mugarama | Community (FG1) |
| Man 3 | M | | Mugarama | Community (FG1) |
| Man 4 | M | | Mugarama | Community (FG1) |
| Man 5 | M | | Mugarama | Community (FG1) |
| Man 6 | M | | Mugarama | Community (FG1) |
| Man 7 | M | | Mugarama | Community (FG1) |
| Man 8 | M | | Mugarama | Community (FG1) |
| Woman 1 | F | | Mugarama | Community (FG2) |
| Woman 2 | F | | Mugarama | Community (FG2) |
| Woman 3 | F | | Mugarama | Community (FG2) |
| Woman 4 | F | | Mugarama | Community (FG2) |
| Woman 5 | F | | Mugarama | Community (FG2) |
| Woman 6 | F | | Mugarama | Community (FG2) |
| Woman 7 | F | | Mugarama | Community (FG2) |
| Woman 8 | F | | Mugarama | Community (FG2) |
| Woman 9 | F | | Mugarama | Community (FG2) |
| Woman 10 | F | | Mugarama | Community (FG2) |
| Bright Mwebembezi | M | 21 | Mugarama | Community |
| Sanyu Ruth | F | 45 | Mugarama | Community |
| Mgonzi Robert | M | 20 | Mugarama | Community (FG3) |
| Nyamahunge Caroline | F | 25 | Mugarama | Community (FG3) |
| Nabanja Harriet | F | 24 | Mugarama | Community (FG3) |
| Atuzalirule Messiah | M | 20 | Mugarama | Community (FG3) |
| Awusibwe John | M | 18 | Mugarama | Community (FG3) |
| Friday Denis | M | 29 | Mugarama | Community (FG3) |

| Name | Sex | Age | Location | Category |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Monday William | M | 20 | Mugarama | Community (FG3) |
| Namukisa Harriet | F | 15 | Mugarama | Community (FG3) |
| NyamhungeScovia | F | 14 | Mugarama | Community (FG3) |
| KusmerwaPlaxeda | F | 14 | Mugarama | Community (FG3) |
| Kamanyire Jacob | M | 27 | Mugarama | Community (FG3) |
| Sserubombwe Robert | M | 31 | Mugarama | Community (FG3) |
| NabitosiDezirata | F | 19 | Mugarama | Community (FG3) |
| TimbigambaIsongoma | M | 30 | Mugarama | Community |
| Masanyu Florence | F | 41 | Muhoro | Community |
| KyakuhareEdinansi | F | 57 | Muhoro | Community |
| Nyakoojo Joseph | M | 48 | Muhoro | Community |
| Ndolerire Samuel | M | 53 | Muhoro | Community |
| Ngaronsa Theresa | F | 44 | Muhoro | Community |
| MukafariyoGadensio | F | 60 | Muhoro | Community |
| Tulyagumanawe Sylvester | M | 37 | Muhoro | Government |
| Tibalemwa Charles | M | 51 | Muhoro | Community |
| MbaziFausta | F | 50 | Muhoro | Community |
| Akello Agnes | F | | Mugarama | Epicenter Manager |
| AtegekaKasfa | F | | Kabamba | Epicenter Manager |
| NabukirwaScholastica | F | | Pachwa | Epicenter Manager |
| Anakuya Mary Goreth | F | | Burora | Epicenter Manager |
| Kyomutima Rachael | F | | Muhorro | Epicenter Manager |

## 10.3 Questionnaire For Community Members

1. What is your personal vision for rural development?
2. What is your vision for a developed rural community?
3. Why do you think that many rural communities in Uganda are underdeveloped?
4. What impact has the Epicenter manager had on your community?
5. One proposal to develop Uganda is to commercialize agriculture and shift rural communities into urban areas to reduce the number of people who work in agriculture. Do you think this is a good proposal for rural communities?
6. Are you aware of Uganda Vision 2040? Do you agree with its vision and principles?
7. Do you feel that the Ugandan government adequately supports rural development? In what ways?
8. Do you feel that rural development should be a bottom up or top down process?
   Why?
9. Do you feel that rural development right now is bottom up or top down? Why?

## 10.4 Questionnaire for Government Officials

1. What priorities does your community have for rural development?
2. How do you find out what these priorities are?
3. Why do you think many rural communities in Uganda are underdeveloped?
4. Does your subcounty currently have a subcounty development plan? How was it drafted?

5. How do you share this vision for development with higher levels of the government? Does it impact the District plan?
6. What funding is available to you to implement the subcounty plan?
7. How do you gain political support?
8. One proposal to develop Uganda is to commercialize agriculture and shift rural communities into urban areas to reduce the number of people who work in agriculture. Do you think this is a good proposal for rural communities?
9. Are you familiar with Uganda Vision 2040? Do you agree with it?
10. Do you think that rural development should be top down or bottom up?
11. Do you think that rural development is now top down or bottom?


## 10.5 Questionnaire for Epicenter Managers

1. Briefly describe the main activities are your Epicenter?
2. Does your community currently have a community action plan (CAP)? To what extent has this been incorporated into the subcounty plan?
3. How was this vision generated?
4. Has the Epicenter been effective at meeting the stated goals of the community? Which goals? Why or why not?
5. What are the primary challenges that the Epicenter faces?
6. What is the Epicenter's funding structure?
7. What is the Epicenter's organizational network?
8. Can you describe the relationship between the Ugandan government and the Epicenters?
9. Do you feel that the Ugandan government currently prioritizes rural development?
10. Do you feel that rural development in Uganda is currently top down or bottom up?