

Effect of Community Empowerment on Human Development in Vihiga County, Kenya

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Abstract

Community empowerment is a very crucial element for the development of lower levels of society. Its benefits cannot be underestimated in socio-economic and political development hence the need for its investment in its potential. There has been a neglect in women empowerment and capacity building at community levels. Therefore, this study sought to evaluate the effects of community empowerment funds on human development in Vihiga County of Kenya. It also focuses on the role of capacity building and women networking in the community as a means of development. The study adopted a descriptive survey design and stratified sampling technique to select a sample size of 384 women respondents from a study target of 12,000 members of microfinance institutions in Vihiga County. The study was anchored in the theory of empowerment. The study adopted with multivariate regression model to analyze study findings. The study established that through the community empowerment fund, schools were easily accessible for all children (60.2%), hospitals were affordable and easily accessible (67.2%), infrastructural development such as roads had generally improved (39.1%) and community projects had been brought to completion with ease. Concerning capacity building, 52.3% of the women found out that it contributed to development socially and economically while women networking emerged as a critical parameter for women empowerment in gaining access to loans/funds and access to relevant information needed for initiating and operating community development. Similarly, the community empowerment fund has played a role in education, initiating new projects, and financing existing projects for the welfare of the community. The study concludes that empowerment fund, community-based groups like networking are very important elements of supporting the developmental initiative in the society since it has changed the perception of peoples on development in Vihiga County of Kenya. The study further recommended that funds should be made available at affordable interest rates so as to invest in projects that improves human well-being such as learning institutions at technical and vocational training institutions and other projects that promotes human development. The study is significant to government agencies, non-governmental organizations and well-wishers who have interest in the well-being of the people.

Key words: *Community, empowerment fund, capacity building, development*

Introduction

The relationship between community empowerment and human development has been a significant concern, especially community empowerment and development issues Phan (2013). The United Nations claims that empowering women is beneficial for community parse and the socio-economic development for all. A country needs to invest more in community capabilities and empower them to contribute to humans' development in general (Nussbaum, 1995). In the 1990s, development programs started to recognize the role of women's empowerment in human development. The United Nations first defined women empowerment after the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. During the conference, five components of community empowerment were identified as women's sense of self-worth, right and ability to determine choices, right to have access to opportunities and resource, right to control their own lives, and right or ability to influence the direction of social change to create more just social and economic order (United Nations, 1995).

Various scholars have different definitions of women's empowerment. These definitions belong to either the two categories; empowerment as a process, or empowerment as a goal. Therefore, empowerment can be an on-going process rather than a product; there is no final goal. Empowerment is a process where the powerless gain control over the circumstances of their lives. This includes both controls over resources and ideology (Phan, 2013). Duflo (2012), emphasizes "power" as the ability to make choices, and "empowerment" is the process of acquiring the ability to make choices by those who are denied such ability. In the latter definition of the concept. Duflo (2012), emphasizes that empowerment has to be claimed by the group that wants to be empowered, especially women.

In the second viewpoint, empowerment is considered a goal in itself. It is about ability: women's ability to control one's health, life, and change the world (Phan, 2013). The process of community empowerment is dynamic and not static and may vary over time subject to resources and achievements and age, duration, and marital status (Sarker & Chakrabarti, 2013). The term empowerment means redistribution of power to the less powered group and differs with cultures, situations, and life cycles. Therefore, this study sought to evaluate the effect of community empowerment funds on human development in Vihiga County, Kenya.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study was to evaluate the effects of community empowerment fund on Human development in Vihiga County, Kenya

The Theory of Empowerment

This study is anchored on the theory of empowerment. The concept began in the 1990s to replace community participation. Empowerment has conceptually evolved from the idea of participation in technical activities to a broader concern of improving the poor's life situations. Empowerment theory was identified as a principal theory of community psychology (Rappaport, 1981). At the community level, empowerment refers to collective actions to improve the community's quality of life and community organisations' connections. The theory further explains the process by which the local people gain the power to influence decision-making. This theory is anticipated to emphasize empowerment because levels of citizen oppression and marginalization by society through poverty and abuse, social alienation, and lack of access to valued resources should classify them accordingly to serve according to their needs. This theory is relevant as it focuses upon expansions of freedom of choices and actions. When the oppressed and the marginalized citizen gain power and control over decisions that affect their lives and resources that determine the quality of the life they lead is at the center of empowerment. This is critical for building self-esteem, which is both an outcome and part of the empowerment process.

Empirical Literature

Zimmerman (1993) argues that when an individual feels powerless, that sense of powerlessness robs him of the ability to act for and find solutions to life's challenges. In the long run, results in alienation from one's environment due to the indifference created by lack of self-worth and self-blame, hence a growing dependency on social services and specialists to solve the existing challenges. Consequently, Perkins and Zimmermann (1995) suggest that any process for community empowerment should involve people's full participation in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of decisions determining societies' functioning and well-being. Similarly, Hur (2006) indicates that community empowerment mechanisms should foster collective responsibility commitment and care for all and develop problem-solving and political efficiency that seeks to influence people's quality of life. This enables the disempowered groups to gain some level of control over the pace of their development. The theory plays an imperative role in addressing social, cultural, political, and economic determinants that reinforce human development and seek to shape partnerships with other sectors to find solutions to problems that influence human development in the County. Empowerment theory sparks interest because human development is useful when the interventions require empowerment-related processes and outcomes across multiple analysis levels. These are vital concepts that communities should adopt to remedy inequalities and achieve equality and fairness in resource distribution (Braithwaite & Lythcott, 1989; Tones & Tilford, 2001).

Karra and Lissner, (2016) reveal various aspects of the social and economic enhancement of MFI members. In a study, MFI members in the Philippines reported different benefits derived from participating in MFIs both to the household members and the health of community that aid in the process of human development, for instance, community empowerment proves beneficial for child health and survival (Rehman & Ahmed, 2017). The findings revealed that more than half of the children from the community microfinance empowerment had normal nutritional status compared to 30 per cent of the control (lack of community microfinance empowerment) groups.

These findings suggest that MFIs have the potential to make a positive influence in areas such as entrepreneurship, education, and housing, job security and income generation. This study explores this issue further using a structured questionnaire approach as explained in the next section. As presented above previous studies have not indicated if the community microfinance empowerment has a significant effect on human development. As such, the current study will evaluate the significant effect of community microfinance empowerment on human development in Vihiga County, Kenya.

According to Montgomerie and Bündenbender (2015), there are significant arguments cautioning against fiscal decentralization, based on the key point that devolution can reinforce gender inequalities, which hinder economic growth. Based on the empirical evidence from 12 European Union countries with a two-way fixed effects panel data model, Bell, (2014) indicated that there is a negative correlation between fiscal decentralization and the level of regional inequality as well as social economic welfare, since devolution of fiscal power from central government to regional and local government may generate a more balanced distribution of resources across regions. Such kind of argument has also been supported by Bell, (2014) that fiscal decentralization contributes to economic development and eventually results in the reduction of regional disparities. Rehman and Ahmed (2017), emphasize that because of the mobility of labor and capital, states are in greater competition with each other than ever before, causing them to focus more on economic development and less on social welfare.

Research Methodology

Study Area

The study was conducted in Vihiga County, Western Kenya region. Its altitude ranges between 1,300m and 1,800m above sea level. The County lies approximately between latitudes 00° 0' and 0° 15' north of the equator and longitudes 34° 30' and 35° 0' east of the great Meridian.

The equator cuts across the southern part of the County. The County covers 531.0 square kilometers, which forms 0.09% of the Republic of Kenya's total land area. The County is divided into five sub-counties that also serve as constituencies: Luanda, Emuhaya, Hamisi, Sabatia, and Vihiga. Vihiga County borders Nandi County to the east, Kakamega County to the north, Siaya County to the west, and Kisumu County to the south. The county was chosen because of a large number of community enterprises with inadequate funds to loan the members to invest in livelihood improving projects.

Research Design and Sampling Procedure

The study adopted a descriptive research design employing a case study approach. The case study approach enabled in-depth examination so that the real experiences of Vihiga County people were captured. The design was used to analyze the effects of devolution on human development in Vihiga County. A stratified random sampling technique was employed for the study. The stratified random sampling technique involved dividing the population into stratum or groups and then drawing samples randomly from each group to interview (Wawire & Nafukho, 2010). This was necessary to ensure that each group was represented in the entire sample. The analysis units were households or members of the women empowerment groups in Vihiga county who have accessed the women's microfinance loans. Each selected sub-county formed the stratum from which the sample was drawn. To determine a representative sample from the general population. The study target population was 12, 000. The research instruments that the study utilized structured in-depth interview questionnaires. Structured questionnaires were administered to the respondents in all five sub-counties. In-depth questions allowed collecting primary data on beneficiaries' opinions and experiences of community empowerment funds to capture the information being sought in this study. Data collected were tabulated, cleaned, organized, coded, and categorized for analysis. Data analysis was conducted through a multivariate regression model with the aid of SPSS version 24.0 software.

Findings

The analysis based on the effect of community empowerment funds and the responses was carried out using the Likert scale at a range from 1-disagree, 2-neutral, and 3- agree as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Effect of Community Empowerment Funds on Human Development

	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Mean	Std Deviation
Schools are easily accessible for all	10.2	29.7	60.2	2.50	0.674
Hospitals are easily accessible	15.6	17.2	67.2	2.52	0.751
The road network leading to the community has improved	26.8	39.1	34.1	2.07	0.778
Community playgrounds are easily accessible	27.1	43.2	29.7	2.03	0.754
I can access the road easily from my house when I want to travel to the town	57.0	22.9	20.1	1.63	0.797
The nearest post office is easily accessible	18.0	5.7	76.3	2.58	0.777
I get access to and read the newspaper often	73.4	24.7	1.8	1.28	0.490
I can access information whenever I want	21.9	20.1	58.0	2.36	0.819

Most participants at 60.2 % agreed that schools were easily accessible for all, thus enabling each to acquire primary education with a minimum number of years in school. The study used education as a measure of human development; therefore, accessibility of schools shows an increase in literacy level hence leading to human development. The schools around enabled them to acquire knowledge to manage and operate the groups.

Those who agreed that they had access to hospitals and received healthcare services quickly and have excellent and lengthy life were 67.2% which shows improvement in human development. The majority at 39.1 percent were undecided whether the road leading to the community improved. The same situation applies to the accessibility of the community playground represented by 43.2%. Then, 57.0% disagreed with the statement that they could easily access roads from their residential areas. This means that accessing the markets to sell their produce to earn income to improve the respondents' living standards was somehow tricky, leading to the deterioration in human development in Vihiga county. The findings were in agreement with those of Blewitt (2014), accessibility to both schools and hospitals results in an improvement in human development in a given area.

Capacity Building

Further, on the effect of community empowerment funds, the study also examined capacity building's role. This is because it generates knowledge, skills, and expertise that enhance analytical capacity, improving women's group management and operation. Capacity building also helps determine the group's performance in improving members' living standards and competitive advantage over other groups.

The participants were asked to indicate whether they had attended any training to assess the role of capacity building to the successful management, operations, and usage of community funds and loans advanced by microfinance institutions. Further, the respondents who answered affirmatively were further asked to state the number of training pieces on the formation and management of women groups. The result shows that

52.3% reported yes, while less than half at 47.7% reported no to the question. This indicates that women groups find capacity building a major factor in ensuring that women groups management and operation were channeled towards the improvement of the members' human development. Also, it assists in initiating projects such as health centers, nursery schools, and social amenities that positively improve the living standards in the County hence improving human development in terms of good health, high income generated, and literacy level as shown in Table 2. On responding to the institution that offered the training, more than a third of the members (34.62%) were trained by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), 26.9% by government officials, and 23.08% the church, and 15.38% by microfinance institutions and or bank. This implies that the NGOs and government had noted the importance of capacity building and need to ensure that respondents have the required knowledge and skills to manage and operate projects and businesses owned by the groups as shown in Figure 1.

Table 2

Capacity Building and Human Development

Have you attended any training?		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No	183	47.7	47.7	47.7
	Yes	201	52.3	52.3	100.0
	Total	384	100.0	100.0	

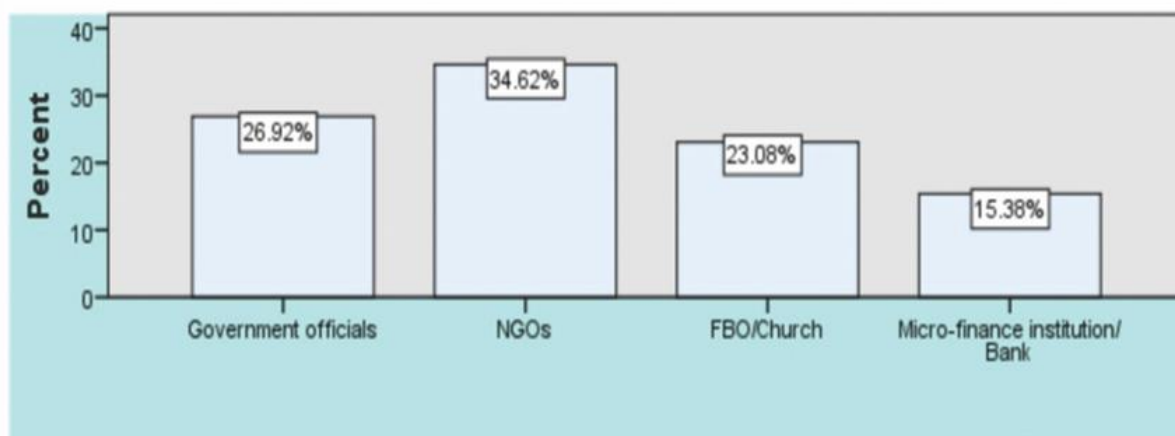


Figure 1: Capacity building

In community empowerment, the study also looked at women empowerment groups that use social relations and social contacts to access information, viable projects, and donors and financiers. Besides, the study considered networking as a variable that determines human development. The study investigated whether women community empowerment groups were members of any social group related to management and operation of the women groups where the 70% indicated that they were members of social groups while 30% were not. The 70% agreed that being members of social groups helps them create social networks that assisted them access loans from microfinance at affordable interest rates and funds from county women empowerment kitty. The funds, in turn, improve the living standards of the respondents. The study found out that networking was a critical element for women empowerment groups in gaining access to loans/funds, advice, and information needed to initiate and operate new and existing projects (Obaidullah & Shirazi, 2014) as illustrated in Figure 2.

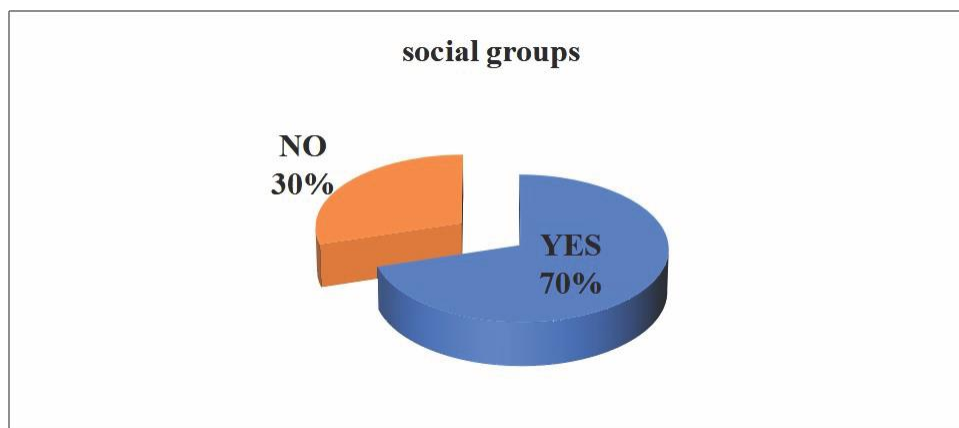


Figure 2: Women Networking Groups, tv

Capacity building was measured through training attended by the respondents who participated in the study. The results show that capacity building was positively related to human development and significance at 5%. The respondents' number of training determines how practical women groups projects and business would be managed and operated, hence yielding more returns and profits and subsequently resulting in improved human development. The results agreed as in Table 2 at 52.3% of the respondents had attended training on women group management and operations.

Women networking was measured by social groups that the members were involved in, and the study found that networking was positively related to human development with a coefficient term of 0.452 and significance at 5%.

This means that the women groups' networking involved sharing vital information on loan availability, affordability, and accessibility; hence women groups would access the loans to finance the groups' projects and generate more income. The income generated improves the standard of living of the group hence human development. Group social media also shared information on potential donors and financiers to finance the women projects and programs that impact the life of the members hence improving the human development of the people of Vihiga County

Conclusion

Most respondents revealed that the community-based group had played an imperative role in educating the community on the importance of supporting the development. Some stated that poor people suffered because they could not access the project or did not have enough knowledge about the project. Community education has affected and changed the way people perceive development.

The study shows that community empowerment, community microfinance and devolution significantly predict human development.

The study also found out that most people in Vihiga County were members of community women groups. Community grouping encourages people to start businesses and engage in different projects that are helpful in the community. The community members have gained a lot of business expertise from these groups, which is the reason for business success. The findings are in line with the conclusion made by Blewitt, (2014), who indicated that in recent years' community-based groups have helped most youths to secure employment in addition to contributing to community development projects. The study also concluded that the groups had made youths more self-reliant. A community-based group was beneficial to members; for instance, it played an essential role in increasing income and knowledge of the people and participating in the community development projects.

Community empowerment affected the way people accessed services. The study found out that the community empowerment fund played a role in educating, initiating new projects, and financing existing projects for the welfare community. Moreover, poor people suffered because they could not access the project or did not have enough knowledge about the project. Community education affected and changed the way people perceived the development of Vihiga County (Nampila, 2005).

The study found out that respondents strongly agreed that schools were easily accessible for all, hospitals were easily accessible, and the road network leading to the community had improved.

This is the result of empowerment whereby people have to conduct their activities without leadership interference, and thus they can access any form of information anytime they wish. The findings support the conclusion made by Mason and Azad, (2014) who revealed that empowering the community requires the evacuation of formal and casual institutional obstructions that keep them from making a move to enhance human development sustainability. This is important in ensuring that there is an improvement to social and group improvement.

Recommendation

The study recommends that funds should be made available to women enterprises to allow them advance affordable loans to the members so as to invest in life-improving projects as well as their education to improve literacy level and health as these are the key dimensions of human development.

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