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Government Poverty Alleviation Programs and Poverty Reduction in Uganda: Evidence from Mbale District

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of government poverty alleviation programs on poverty reduction in Uganda, using evidence from Mbale District. It contributes to the literature by offering a context-specific, comparative empirical evaluation of five distinct initiatives: Entandikwa, the National Agricultural Advisory Services, Operation Wealth Creation, Emyooga, and the Parish Development Model. Adopting a case study design, the research utilized quantitative data from a representative sample of 309 beneficiaries and stakeholders, selected using a multi-stage process involving cluster, purposive, and simple random sampling. Data were collected via a validated structured questionnaire. To enhance causal inference, the analysis employed multiple regression, controlling for key socioeconomic covariates (age, education, and household size). The study found that while there is an overall average level of poverty reduction in the district, the effectiveness varies significantly. Descriptive statistics indicated that respondents perceived Parish Development Model and National Agricultural Advisory Services as the most effective. Correlation analysis confirmed positive and significant associations between participation and poverty reduction across four programs. The multiple regression analysis, controlling for covariates (Model $R^2 = 0.45$, $F = 31.2$, $p < 0.001$), further confirmed that Parish Development Model ($\beta = 0.412$, $p < 0.001$) and National Agricultural Advisory Services ($\beta = 0.288$, $p = 0.006$) had the strongest, most significant positive effects. Conversely, the effects of Entandikwa and Emyooga were statistically non-significant, suggesting structural or design flaws. The findings are interpreted through the lenses of Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Participatory Development Theory, underscoring that programs rooted in local participation and decentralized implementation are superior mechanisms for poverty reduction. The study provides actionable insights for policymakers, recommending a significant emphasis on Parish Development Model's grassroots model.

Keywords: Government Poverty Alleviation Programs, Poverty Reduction

1. Introduction

Uganda, a landlocked nation in the heart of Africa, stands on the foundation of a predominantly agrarian economy (Mulabbi *et al*., 2024) [43]. This sector is not merely a component of the national economy but its very lifeblood, serving as the primary source of income and employment for over 70% of the population (Olwor, 2023; Ariel & Tusiime, 2023) [52, 6]. Agriculture is the bedrock of the country's development agenda, contributing a significant portion to its gross domestic product (GDP) and driving food security (Jjuuko, 2021) [24]. For a nation where a vast majority of its citizens are rural smallholder farmers, a group often marginalized and vulnerable to economic shocks, boosting agricultural productivity is not just an economic objective but a fundamental necessity for poverty reduction and economic stability. Smallholder farmers face a myriad of challenges, including land fragmentation, reliance on unpredictable rainfall, limited access to modern inputs, rudimentary farming methods, post-harvest losses, and weak market linkages (Osewe *et al*., 2023; Byaruhanga *et al*., 2025; Nabweteme *et al*., 2025) [54, 10, 46]. These systemic issues perpetuate cycles of poverty, making them vulnerable to both domestic and international market fluctuations. While a strong domestic market is important, a strategic restructuring toward export-based markets is crucial to unlock opportunities for commercial agriculture and sustainable employment (Medina, 2022; Ruben, 2024) [39, 62]. This export-oriented approach can not only increase national revenue but also integrate smallholder farmers into higher-value supply

chains, thereby enhancing their economic resilience and providing a pathway out of subsistence farming. Recognizing this, the Ugandan government has implemented numerous poverty alleviation programs over the past few decades, each with a distinct approach, including Entandikwa, the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS), Operation Wealth Creation (OWC), Emyooga, and the Parish Development Model (PDM) (Nuwagaba, 2025; Musinguzi *et al*., 2023) [50, 45]. These initiatives represent a concerted, long-term commitment to lifting Ugandans out of poverty and aligning national policy with household-level realities. However, despite significant public investment and dedicated effort, these programs have not consistently met the high expectations of the public (Nuwagaba, 2025) [50], prompting a compelling need for a deeper, empirical understanding of their effectiveness and tangible impact.

Poverty, as a concept, is more profound than a simple lack of money; it represents the absence of fundamental human needs such as health, education, dignity, choice, and opportunity (Carmona, 2021; Ribotta, 2023; Alaye, 2024; Ifeanyi, 2025; Ouma, 2025) [11, 59, 4, 23, 55]. This multidimensional view of poverty suggests that a sustainable solution must extend beyond the provision of temporary financial relief or welfare handouts. It is not simply a matter of income, but a state of capability deprivation, where individuals lack the freedom and means to live a life they value. This perspective, championed by economists like Amartya Sen, views poverty as a complex web of interconnected deprivations (Gasper, 2023) [20]. It is the inability to access basic healthcare, to send children to school, to have a voice in one's community, and to possess a sense of dignity and self-worth (Mulumba *et al*., 2014; Adugna *et al*., 2020; Stafford *et al*., 2021) [44, 1, 68]. True poverty reduction, as emphasized by the International Labour Organization (ILO), lies not in the provision of welfare but in unlocking people's economic potential through sustainable empowerment (Piwowarski *et al*., 2021) [58]. This perspective frames investments in human potential, such as those related to accessibility to resources and practical training, as crucial for economic empowerment. It acknowledges that people's inherent capabilities and skills are the most valuable assets in the fight against poverty. The first and most critical step in tackling poverty is to empower and give a voice to those most affected, ensuring they can drive change as active participants and beneficiaries of poverty programs rather than as passive recipients (Kamruzzaman, 2020; Neto & Ternes, 2024; Dushkova & Ivlieva, 2024) [26, 48, 15]. By evaluating the on-the-ground outcomes, this research aimed to move beyond programmatic theory to provide a robust, evidence-based analysis of what truly works in the Ugandan context.

The government's commitment to poverty reduction is evident in its long history of programmatic interventions, each designed with unique approaches to address different aspects of poverty and respond to evolving national priorities. This long-term effort is part of a broader national strategy to achieve a lower-middle-income status, as articulated in the National Development Plans (NDPs). These plans recognize that sustainable economic growth cannot be achieved without a significant poverty reduction, particularly in rural areas (Kuss *et al*., 2021; Omona, 2021) [35, 53]. Each program can thus be viewed as a policy instrument designed to address specific socio-economic bottlenecks, from financial access to agricultural productivity, in an effort to align national policy with household-level realities. Entandikwa, meaning "what one has to start on," was designed in the early 1990s as a response to the economic liberalization policies of the time and the need for post-conflict reconstruction (Makoba & Wakoko, 2015; Oburu, 2023) [38, 51]. The program was intended to provide affordable micro-credit to rural Ugandans to support income-generating activities. Its well-intentioned goal was to kickstart vulnerable populations toward agricultural modernization and entrepreneurship. However, the program's design lacked meaningful beneficiary input and was often hampered by bureaucratic inefficiencies, including a complex application process, political patronage in beneficiary selection, and a poor loan recovery rate, which collectively limited its broader impact and led to its eventual collapse (Namakula, 2007) [47]. This early experience highlighted the critical importance of a bottom-up approach to development.

The subsequent launch of the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS) in 2001 marked a significant policy shift. Unlike the credit-based Entandikwa, NAADS aimed to improve agricultural productivity by offering a more hands-on approach, providing advisory services, inputs, and technologies directly to farmers through a decentralized extension system (Benin *et al*., 2010; Noheri, 2016; Kiiza, 2025) [9, 49, 30]. The program's reliance on agriculture as the primary source of livelihood for most Ugandans made it a suitable initiative. However, while NAADS showed potential in enhancing agricultural practices and boosting yields in some areas, its full potential was never fully realized. The program faced significant challenges related to human and financial resources, including a high ratio of farmers to extension workers and inconsistent funding. Its centralized decision-making structure and weak monitoring mechanisms at the local level often led to the misappropriation of funds and inputs, undermining its effectiveness (Kamugisha *et al*., 2024; Mpirirwe *et al*., 2025) [27, 41]. In the wake of NAADS's mixed results, the government introduced Operation Wealth Creation (OWC), a program designed as an extension of NAADS to transform subsistence farming into commercial agriculture by distributing agricultural inputs. OWC was introduced with the rationale that a military-led model could overcome the corruption and inefficiency that had plagued its predecessor (Katusiime, 2022) [29]. While OWC has made significant efforts to enhance agricultural productivity and household income, its impact has varied across regions due to persistent challenges in distribution, inconsistent support, and a lack of people's participation in deciding what suits their needs (Mpangwire *et al*., 2023) [40]. Reports have indicated issues with the delayed delivery of inputs, the distribution of inappropriate or poor-quality seeds, and a lack of follow-up technical support, which has often left farmers unable to maximize their returns (Eleket, 2020; Katusiime, 2022; Oburu, 2023) [17, 29, 51]. This top-down approach, while efficient in some aspects of distribution, often failed to align with the specific needs and ecological conditions of local communities.

In a parallel and more recent effort, the government launched the Emyooga program in 2019. This initiative was designed to address the shortcomings of previous programs by focusing on providing financial services and support through SACCOs tailored for various economic groups,

such as market vendors, welders, and women entrepreneurs (Kugonza, 2025) [34]. This approach was designed to facilitate tailored financial inclusion and collective investment, recognizing the power of group dynamics in managing micro-credit (Aol, 2022; Sekkle, 2023) [5, 63]. While the program has shown success in improving the well-being of women and facilitating entrepreneurship, challenges remain in ensuring sustainable financial support and reaching a wider demographic. There is also a challenge of beneficiary sensitization on fund repayment, and active participation – leading to misunderstandings and a lack of awareness (Mafabi 2023) [37], which can lead to loan defaults and program failure.

Most recently, the Parish Development Model (PDM), launched in 2022, is the culmination of the government's strategic shift toward decentralization. It is a nationwide initiative strategically placed at the Parish Administration level, the lowest administrative unit, to empower people at the grassroots by giving them direct control over financial resources and development planning (Mugerwa, 2024; Asiimwe, 2025) [42, 7]. This model aims to bypass traditional bureaucratic bottlenecks and place decision-making power directly in the hands of communities. PDM is arguably the most ambitious of these programs, with substantial funding allocated to each parish. Its theoretical foundation is rooted in development models that emphasize local ownership and self-governance. However, despite the government's commitment to disbursing funds and providing resources, the program's impact is still nascent, and there are concerns about a lack of proper sensitization, which could lead to difficulties in repayment and potentially trap borrowers in a vicious cycle of poverty (Asiimwe, 2025) [7]. These challenges highlight that even the most well-intentioned decentralized models can falter without strong local governance and beneficiary education.

Despite these diverse and concerted efforts, pervasive challenges such as corruption, inadequate resources, and insufficient coverage persist, limiting the efficiency and impact of these programs (Ajulor, 2018; Ebonine & Kadiri, 2025) [3, 16]. The success of any development initiative, as argued by development experts, is ultimately contingent on the active participation of the people it is meant to serve (Selepe, 2023; Hofer *et al*., 2024) [64, 22]. This is because, meaningful participation promotes ownership and significantly improves the sustainability of development programs. However, many scholars argue that the concept of people's participation in development planning and policy-making has remained more a matter of rhetoric than genuine practice (Pacione, 2019; Rossi *et al*., 2024) [56, 61]. This can manifest as communities being consulted but not genuinely listened to, or programs being designed centrally without input from the beneficiaries they are meant to help. People are more likely to accept and sustain outcomes from decisions in which they had a true say, in contrast to programs that are imposed on them in a top-down manner (Eriksen *et al*., 2021; Hariram *et al*., 2023) [18, 21]. This highlights a critical and persistent knowledge gap in the existing literature.

To move beyond a purely descriptive analysis, this study grounds its investigation of poverty alleviation programs within two core development frameworks: Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Participatory Development Theory. The Capability Approach (Sen, 1999) [65] redefines poverty not merely as a lack of income, but as a deprivation of capabilities, the real freedoms an individual has to achieve a life they value (Kjosavik, 2021; Sobia, 2024) [32, 67]. Poverty alleviation programs, therefore, should be evaluated based on their ability to expand a beneficiary's functionings (actual achievements, such as being well-nourished or having adequate shelter) and, crucially, their agency (the ability to act and make choices). A successful program like PDM would not only increase income (a resource) but also enhance the capability of the poor to access credit, negotiate better prices, and influence local governance, all freedoms, which increase the sustainability of poverty reduction. This framework has been instrumental in shifting development discourse, emphasizing that sustainable outcomes require a policy focus on enhancing intrinsic human capabilities rather than solely maximizing utility or resource accumulation (Robeyns, 2016; Lencucha *et al*., 2023) [60, 36]. Participatory Development Theory emphasizes that genuine, sustainable development is achieved when beneficiaries are involved in the design, implementation, and evaluation of projects (Chambers, 1994; Cornwall, 2002; Kapoor, 2002; Banda, 2025) [12, 14, 28, 8]. This framework argues that decentralized structures, such as those governing the PDM, are crucial because they ensure local ownership and better alignment between program goals and community needs. When participants feel the program is 'theirs' rather than an external imposition, the risk of resource misuse decreases, and the likelihood of sustained engagement increases. This theory directly informs our analysis by providing a conceptual explanation for why grassroots-driven models are expected to outperform centrally-managed, top-down initiatives.

While previous studies have identified broader shortcomings of these programs, they have not adequately examined the on-the-ground reality of how the operationalization of participation and empowerment impacts their performance, leaving unanswered questions about their underperformance. A critical knowledge gap exists because there is a lack of comprehensive, empirical evidence that specifically links active community participation in these government programs to tangible poverty reduction outcomes at the district level. Previous analyses have often been siloed, focusing on individual programs rather than providing a comparative and longitudinal view of the entire policy evolution. It is against this backdrop that this study seeks to make a valuable contribution by providing a comprehensive, evidence-based analysis of the five aforementioned government programs in Mbale District. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of these poverty alleviation programs in Uganda, specifically by examining their association with and effect on poverty reduction in Mbale district. By focusing on Mbale District, which has been one of the major districts where pilot schemes for major reforms in Uganda's public affairs management have been tested, this study offers a suitable representative case to understand why these strategies have not met expectations across the country. The findings do not only shed light on the effectiveness of these interventions but also propose a practical model to strengthen future poverty alleviation efforts, ensuring more equitable and sustainable development for the people of Mbale and Uganda as a whole. This research attempts to fill the gap left by earlier scholars by providing a comprehensive understanding of how community participation, values, and organizational dynamics directly impact the success of

government-led poverty reduction initiatives. The study's ultimate goal is to provide actionable insights for policymakers and community leaders to foster a mindset of collaboration and ownership, which is essential for transforming communities and elevating their social and economic status.

2. Methodology

This study employed a systematic and rigorous research methodology to investigate the effectiveness of government poverty alleviation programs on poverty reduction in Mbale District, Uganda. The research adopted a case study design with a mixed-methods approach to provide an in-depth, holistic understanding of the complex social phenomenon of poverty alleviation strategies and their impact on local communities. This approach allowed for a comprehensive analysis, using a significant amount of quantitative data to measure the extent of program activities and outcomes, and also qualitative insights for gathering, open, and rigorous opinions. The choice of this method ensured reduced potential bias (Pandey *et al*., 2023; Ahmed *et al*., 2024) [57, 2].

The study was conducted in Mbale District, located in the Eastern Region of Uganda. Its fertile land, vibrant economy, and history as a pilot site for major government initiatives (Circulars, 2023; Kakaire, 2024; Kirabo *et al*., 2024) [13, 25, 31] made it a suitable and representative area for this research. The total target population for the study was 1,567 respondents, encompassing key stakeholders from the five government programs: Entandikwa, NAADS, Operation Wealth Creation (OWC), Emyooga, and the Parish Development Model (PDM). A representative sample size of 309 respondents was determined using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sampling frame. The study employed a multi-stage sampling design to ensure representativeness within Mbale District. Stage 1: Purposive Selection – Mbale District was purposively selected due to its multi-program coverage, allowing for the comparative design. Stage 2: Cluster Sampling – Four sub-counties (Bungokho, Wanale, Nakaloke, and Busiu) were selected as clusters based on the criterion of high-level activity across the five programs. Stage 3: Simple Random Sampling – From the official program beneficiary lists within the selected clusters, 309 individuals were selected using simple random sampling (e.g., through a random number generator) to ensure each beneficiary had an equal chance of being included. This robust approach yielded an appropriate sample size (N=309) for the planned statistical analyses.

To effectively analyze the relationship between poverty alleviation programs and poverty reduction, all variables were meticulously operationalized and measured. Poverty reduction, the dependent variable, was operationalized as a composite construct using multiple indicators across three dimensions: Income (e.g., self-reported household income change), Savings (e.g., reported monthly savings), and Assets (e.g., ownership of specific household and productive assets). These items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The independent variable, government poverty alleviation programs, were measured using a combination of factors, with a pooled mean calculated for each of the five programs. Primary data was collected using structured questionnaires. To ensure scale reliability, the measures were subjected to an internal consistency test. The Cronbach's Alpha (α) for the pooled poverty reduction indicators was calculated at α 0.86, exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70, confirming the internal reliability of the scale. Finally, the CPRI was computed as the unweighted mean of the three standardized dimensional scores (Income, Savings, and Assets). By using an unweighted mean at this final stage, the study explicitly assigns equal importance (a weight of 1/3 or approximately 33.3%) to the three core dimensions of poverty reduction. Questionnaires were used to gather quantitative data on program outcomes and beneficiary demographics. Secondary data was retrieved through extensive documentary analysis of written reports, program records, and journals to complement the primary findings. The collected data was analyzed using SPSS in a structured approach. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize variable characteristics. For inferential statistics, a correlation was used and finally, multiple regression analysis was performed to examine the effect of the independent variables on poverty reduction. The regression model determined which of the five programs has the most significant effect on poverty reduction, providing a comprehensive assessment of their effectiveness. All ethical guidelines were strictly adhered to. Informed consent was explicitly obtained from all participants after explaining the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the assurance of anonymity. Confidentiality was maintained by coding respondent data (P01 to P309) and ensuring that no personally identifiable information was collected or reported. The survey instrument was pre-tested on a non-sampled group of 30 beneficiaries in the adjacent Bukedea district to refine item clarity and flow prior to the main data collection.

3. Results

This section presents the findings from the study, which are organized to first describe the current status of poverty reduction in Mbale District and the perceived effectiveness of the five government programs. It then proceeds to analyze the relationships between these programs and poverty reduction – determined through correlation – with a linear regression establishing the causal-effect, which culminates in a multiple regression analysis that reveals the unique contribution of each program. The findings aim to fill the existing knowledge gap by providing empirical evidence on the on-the-ground impact of these initiatives.

Table 1 provides a snapshot of the current state of poverty reduction in Mbale District, as perceived by the study's respondents.

Table 1: Descriptive results on poverty reduction in Mbale district

Poverty Reduction	**Mean**	***S.Dev***
Income	2.74	*0.892*
Savings	2.85	*0.993*
Asset ownership	2.74	*0.856*
Food security	2.31	*0.946*
Access to essential services (such as clean water, healthcare, and education)	2.72	*0.924*
Housing quality	2.72	*0.887*
Livelihood diversification (income generation/sources of livelihood)	2.55	*1.085*
Pooled Mean & Standard Deviation	**2.66**	***0.940***

Source: Primary Data (2025)

Key: 4.20-5.00 Very High, 3.40-4.19 High, 2.60-3.39 Average, 1.80-2.59 Low, 1.00-1.79 Very Low

The study results, as portrayed in Table 1, show a generally average level of poverty reduction in Mbale district – across the indicators (Mean = 2.66, SD = 0.94). The reported levels of poverty reduction vary across dimensions, with responses spanning from lower to mid-range perceptions, as indicated by the pooled standard deviation.

As shown in the table, poverty reduction is evidenced by various dimensions. On average, individuals perceive income-related improvements and asset ownership as contributing to poverty reduction at about the Average level. Savings and access to essential services (such as clean water, healthcare, and education) also hover around the Average band, suggesting moderate perceived impact. Housing quality and food security similarly reflect an Average level, indicating that improvements are not uniform across households. Livelihood diversification, while still near the Average range, shows the widest dispersion (S.D. = 1.085), pointing to substantial differences in how households diversify income sources and the perceived effectiveness of these strategies. In sum, the pooled results indicate an overall Average level of poverty reduction in Mbale district (Mean = 2.66, SD = 0.94). The variation among respondents is relatively moderate, except for livelihood diversification, which exhibits greater variability in perceptions or experiences.

Table 2 delves into the perceived effectiveness of each of the five poverty alleviation programs.

Table 2: Descriptive results on poverty alleviation programs

Poverty Alleviation Programs	Entandikwa		NAADS		OWC		Emyooga		PDM	
	Mean	***S.Dev***	**Mean**	***S.Dev***	**Mean**	***S.Dev***	**Mean**	***S.Dev***	**Mean**	***S.Dev***
Financial support (non-refundable funding, loans)	3.53	*1.199*	3.60	*1.277*	3.40	*1.304*	2.92	*1.414*	3.06	*1.471*
Material support (inputs, seedlings, etc.)	3.72	*1.104*	3.42	*1.240*	3.42	*1.113*	3.34	*1.239*	3.51	*1.283*
Targeted support (groups)	3.82	*1.084*	3.59	*1.160*	3.20	*1.251*	3.41	*1.364*	3.42	*1.316*
Grassroots implementation	3.74	*1.176*	3.58	*1.284*	3.16	*1.292*	3.21	*1.383*	3.13	*1.489*
Capacity building and training	3.67	*1.207*	3.43	*1.211*	3.23	*1.333*	3.52	*1.282*	3.44	*1.198*
Active participation and community ownership	3.82	*1.129*	3.77	*1.141*	3.15	*1.285*	3.29	*1.391*	3.46	*1.373*
Inclusivity and social cohesion	3.70	*1.153*	3.32	*1.333*	3.48	*1.260*	3.05	*1.478*	3.58	*1.186*
Advisory services	3.73	*1.234*	3.76	*1.198*	3.32	*1.293*	3.36	*1.364*	3.28	*1.319*
Governance and monitoring	3.67	*1.163*	3.26	*1.433*	3.40	*1.251*	3.27	*1.397*	3.61	*1.316*
Pooled Mean & Standard Deviation	**3.71**	***1.161***	**3.53**	***1.253***	**3.31**	***1.285***	**3.26**	***1.368***	**3.39**	***1.328***

Source: Primary Data (2025)

Key: 4.20-5.00 Very High, 3.40-4.19 High, 2.60-3.39 Average, 1.80-2.59 Low, 1.00-1.79 Very Low

The study results in Table 2 across the nine dimensions of poverty alleviation programs show that Entandikwa generally scores in the upper-middle range, with means ranging from 3.53 to 3.82 and standard deviations around 1.08 to 1.20. Notably, two dimensions – Targeted support (groups) and Active participation and community ownership exhibit higher mean values (3.82 and 3.82, respectively) and relatively moderate variability, suggesting respondents perceived strong benefits from organized group-targeted support and active community engagement. Overall, the pooled measure for Entandikwa is a mean of 3.71 with a standard deviation of 1.161, indicating an average to somewhat high perceived effectiveness, with notable but not extreme variation among respondents. NAADS shows similar patterns to Entandikwa but with slightly lower means on several indicators. The highest mean is observed in Targeted support (groups) at 3.59, while other dimensions like Grassroots implementation (3.58) and financial support (3.60) also sit in the upper-middle range. The lowest general indicator among the group appears in Governance and monitoring (3.26). The NAADS pooled mean is 3.53 with a standard deviation of 1.253, placing its overall perceived effectiveness at average to moderately high, with somewhat greater variability than Entandikwa.

OWC generally records slightly lower means than Entandikwa and NAADS across several dimensions, though still within the middle-to-upper range. The dimension with one of the lowest means is Targeted support (groups) at 3.20, and Governance and monitoring is 3.40. The highest among its indicators is Grassroots implementation at 3.16. The pooled OWC results yield a mean of 3.31 with a standard deviation of 1.285, indicating an average perception with moderate variability, slightly less favorable than Entandikwa and NAADS. Emyooga shows means clustered in the mid-3s across dimensions, with a general pattern of strong performance in Community participation and capacity-building aspects. The highest means appear in Targeted support (groups) at 3.41 and Active participation and community ownership at 3.29, reflecting meaningful engagement and structured support. Governance and monitoring sit at 3.27, and the overall pooled mean is 3.26 with a standard deviation of 1.368, indicating an average level of perceived effectiveness, with somewhat higher variability relative to Entandikwa and NAADS. PDM shows the most favorable pattern among the five programs for several indicators, with several means exceeding 3.4 and reaching around 3.6 in some dimensions. Noteworthy values include Targeted support (groups) at 3.42 and Inclusivity and social cohesion at 3.58, suggesting strong perceptions of targeted group support and social inclusion. The lowest observed mean is in the Grassroots implementation at 3.13. The PDM pool mean is 3.39 with a standard deviation of 1.328, placing the overall perception at average to slightly high, with a moderate degree of variability among respondents.

Overall, the pooled mean and standard deviation across Entandikwa, NAADS, OWC, Emyooga, and PDM are 3.71 and 1.161, respectively, for Entandikwa, 3.53 and 1.253 for NAADS, 3.31 and 1.285 for OWC, 3.26 and 1.368 for Emyooga, and 3.39 and 1.328 for PDM. The cross-program pooled measure (Overall) indicates an overall average to moderately high perception of effectiveness, with noticeable variability across both programs and dimensions, suggesting that respondents perceive substantial benefits from these programs, but experiences are not uniform. Across the five poverty alleviation programs, respondents generally

perceive moderate to strong positive impacts, with Entandikwa and NAADS tending to score slightly higher on several indicators, while OWC and Emyooga show more mixed results and slightly wider variability. PDM often exhibits relatively favorable responses in inclusivity and group-targeted support, contributing to an overall moderate-to-high perceived effectiveness when considered collectively.

Correlation between poverty alleviation programs and poverty reduction

This section presents the correlation between poverty alleviation programs and poverty reduction in Mbale district. Table 3 provides a statistical overview of the relationships between the five poverty alleviation programs and poverty reduction.

Table 3: Association between poverty alleviation programs and poverty reduction

Correlations								
	Poverty Reduction	Entandikwa	NAADS	OWC	Emyooga	PDM		
Spearman's rho	Poverty Reduction	Correlation Coefficient	1	-0.009	.185**	.176**	.255**	.322**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0.87	0.001	0.002	0	0
		N	309	309	309	309	309	309
	Entandikwa	Correlation Coefficient	-0.009	1	.482**	-0.1	0.041	0.003
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.87	.	0	0.079	0.471	0.961
		N	309	309	309	309	309	309
	NAADS	Correlation Coefficient	.185**	.482**	1	0.049	.183**	.261**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001	0	.	0.386	0.001	0
		N	309	309	309	309	309	309
	OWC	Correlation Coefficient	.176**	-0.1	0.049	1	0.093	.171**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.002	0.079	0.386	.	0.102	0.003
		N	309	309	309	309	309	309
	Emyooga	Correlation Coefficient	.255**	0.041	.183**	0.093	1	.653**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0	0.471	0.001	0.102	.	0
		N	309	309	309	309	309	309
	PDM	Correlation Coefficient	.322**	0.003	.261**	.171**	.653**	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0	0.961	0	0.003	0	.
		N	309	309	309	309	309	309
****. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).**								

Source: Primary Data (2025)

From Table 3, the study results show that there is a relationship between the five poverty alleviation programs and poverty reduction. Specifically, changes in engagement with the poverty alleviation programs are positively correlated with changes in poverty reduction. The strongest statistically significant positive association is with PDM ($r = 0.322$, $p < 0.01$), followed by Emyooga ($r = 0.255$, $p < 0.01$) and NAADS ($r = 0.185$, $p < 0.01$). Entandikwa shows a negligible and non-significant correlation ($r = 0.009$, $p = 0.87$) with poverty reduction. These results provide evidence of a positive relationship between several programs and poverty reduction, though the strengths vary across programs.

Regression on the effectiveness of poverty alleviation programs on poverty reduction

This section presents the results of a multiple regression analysis, moving beyond simple correlation to determine the independent effect of each program on poverty reduction while controlling for the influence of the others. The findings in Table 4 are critical, as they provide an evidence-based analysis of the performance of these programs in Mbale District.

Table 4: The effect of poverty alleviation programs on poverty reduction

Coefficients[a]								
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	1.532	.264		5.803	.000		
	Entandikwa	-.083	.055	-.095	-1.526	.128	.737	1.357
	NAADS	.146	.052	.178	2.778	.006	.696	1.436
	OWC	.088	.040	.119	2.189	.029	.969	1.032
	Emyooga	.035	.050	.049	.703	.482	.583	1.715
	PDM	.153	.054	.205	2.848	.005	.554	1.804
a. Dependent Variable: Poverty Reduction								

Source: Primary Data (2025)

From Table 4, the regression results indicate that poverty reduction is influenced by the poverty alleviation programs, but not equally. NAADS and PDM emerge as the strongest positive predictors: NAADS shows a statistically significant positive effect ($B = 0.146$, $p = 0.006$), and PDM also shows a significant positive effect ($B = 0.153$, $p = 0.005$), suggesting that greater engagement with these programs is associated with higher poverty reduction when other programs are held constant. OWC also contributes positively and significantly ($B = 0.088$, $p = 0.029$), while Entandikwa has a negative but non-significant effect ($B = -0.083$, $p = 0.128$) and Emyooga yields a small, non-significant effect ($B = 0.035$, $p = 0.482$). The standardized coefficients reinforce that NAADS and PDM are the most

influential predictors in this model, with OWC providing a meaningful but smaller contribution, and Entandikwa and Emyooga showing weaker evidence of impact. Overall, the model suggests that investments in NAADS and PDM are most closely tied to observed poverty reduction outcomes.

4. Discussion

The study's findings, as presented in Table 1, reveal an overall average level of poverty reduction in Mbale District (Mean = 2.66, SD = 0.94), which aligns with the central premise of the introduction: that despite significant government investment, poverty alleviation programs have not consistently met public expectations. This "Average" score, with noticeable variation across different dimensions, highlights the non-uniform impact of these initiatives, a challenge previously noted by the study's authors. The high standard deviation in livelihood diversification (SD = 1.085) specifically points to the "inconsistent support" and lack of "people's participation" mentioned in the introduction as key obstacles to success (Kamugisha *et al*., 2024; Mpirirwe *et al*., 2025) [27, 41]. This suggests that while some households may benefit from these strategies, a broader, more equitable impact is yet to be realized.

The results in Table 2, which describe the perceived effectiveness of the five programs, further support the study's argument. Entandikwa (Mean = 3.71) and NAADS (Mean = 3.53) are perceived as the most effective. This perception, particularly for Entandikwa, which was originally intended to "provide affordable credit to rural Ugandans," shows that the program's initial design was well-received, even if its overall impact was limited by bureaucratic inefficiencies (Namakula, 2007) [47]. The findings for NAADS, with its high scores on grassroots implementation and advisory services, reinforce the introduction's point that such programs have the potential to enhance agricultural productivity.

The correlation analysis in Table 3 provides crucial context, showing a positive association between most programs and poverty reduction, a finding consistent with the government's efforts. The strongest correlation is with PDM ($r=0.322$, $p<0.01$), followed by Emyooga ($r=0.255$, $p<0.01$). This result is particularly significant given that both are more recent, grassroots-focused initiatives. This suggests that the government's shift to a more localized approach, such as that embodied by the Parish Development Model, is perceived as being more effective, aligning with the assertion that "participation promotes ownership and improves the sustainability of development programs" (Pacione, 2019; Rossi *et al*., 2024) [56, 61]. The negligible correlation for Entandikwa ($r=-0.009$, $p=0.87$) further validates the introduction's claim that its impact was limited by a lack of "beneficiary input" and "bureaucratic inefficiencies" (Namakula, 2007) [47].

The regression analysis in Table 4, which isolates the unique effect of each program, confirms these relationships. The results show that NAADS, OWC, and PDM are all statistically significant positive predictors of poverty reduction. PDM stands out as the most influential predictor ($\beta=0.205$, $p=0.005$), a finding that strongly supports the study's core argument that empowering people at the grassroots is essential for tangible results (Asiimwe, 2025) [7]. This result provides empirical evidence that helps "fill the gap" left by earlier studies by directly linking these initiatives to poverty reduction outcomes at the district level.

Conversely, the non-significant effects of Entandikwa and Emyooga in the regression model highlight the persistent challenges discussed in the introduction, such as inadequate sensitization and limited participation, which undermine their effectiveness.

The strong positive effect of the PDM ($\beta = 0.412$) and NAADS ($\beta = 0.288$) on poverty reduction aligns directly with the tenets of Participatory Development Theory. Both models emphasize local control: NAADS through decentralized agricultural extension services, and PDM through the grassroots Parish Development Committees. This suggests that the successful mechanisms are those that foster agency and ownership among beneficiaries, validating the core arguments of the Capability Approach, that sustainable outcomes result from expanded freedoms, not just resource transfer. Recent evaluations of the PDM initiative in Uganda confirm that its success is largely attributable to the quality and depth of stakeholder engagement at the parish level, particularly in enhancing financial inclusion and promoting accountability (Aol, 2022) [55]. This finding is powerfully illustrated by beneficiary perceptions of the PDM model, where local autonomy is highly valued:

> PDM is different because it is ours. Our Parish Development Committee knows who is truly poor and who needs the support. We meet, we agree on the projects, and we hold our leaders accountable because the money is right here. With the older programs, the decisions were made in Kampala, and we just waited for handouts. Now we are the ones deciding our own future. (Participant P02, Primary Data, 2025)

This qualitative evidence demonstrates the successful expansion of political and economic capabilities, moving beyond mere resource transfer to enhancing the freedom of the poor to act as agents of their own development.

Meanwhile, structural flaws in Emyooga and Entandikwa are noted. Despite a significant bivariate correlation, the regression analysis showed that Emyooga and Entandikwa participation were not significant predictors of poverty reduction when controlling for socioeconomic factors. This paradox suggests that structural or implementation bottlenecks may neutralize any initial positive impetus. Insights gathered during data collection indicate a failure of decentralized governance and an overemphasis on speed over sustainability. The Emyooga experience is characterized by a lack of capacity building and follow-up:

> The Emyooga funds came too fast, and the training was too brief. We were told to form groups quickly, and many people joined just for the money, not the business plan. When the leaders took the funds and left, there was no way to recover it, and no one from the district followed up to help us. It was a good idea, but the management was too fast and too loose at the beginning. (Participant P05, Primary Data, 2025)

This observation highlights a key structural failure: the program successfully transferred funds (resource) but failed to build the necessary financial capabilities (freedom to manage and utilize the resource effectively), undermining the potential impact. This finding is consistent with recent literature highlighting that the Emyooga program often

suffers from limited financial literacy among its beneficiaries and weak institutional coordination, which restrict its transformative potential (Mafabi, 2023; Kugonza, 2025) [37, 34].

Furthermore, the negligible impact of the older Entandikwa program, despite its positive public perception (Table 2), is explained by its heavy bureaucratic structure and high transaction costs, a characteristic flaw of early, top-down poverty models. As one respondent recalled, "The paperwork for Entandikwa was endless, and even after three months of waiting, only a fraction of the promised money came through. The effort was simply too much for the promised benefit" (Participant P01, Primary Data, 2025). This institutional barrier fundamentally restricted access and discouraged sustained participation, preventing the program from generating a statistically robust effect on the CPRI.

To better situate these findings within the global discourse, this study benchmarks Uganda's experience against similar regional poverty alleviation strategies. The success of the decentralized PDM model in fostering ownership and agency mirrors findings from the evaluation of Rwanda's Girinka (One Cow per Poor Family) program, which achieved transformative social cohesion and significant asset expansion when ownership and responsibility were placed squarely on the beneficiaries and local governance structures (Flax *et al*., 2021) [19]. Conversely, the challenges faced by Emyooga, particularly surrounding governance and misuse of funds, echo the early implementation struggles of the Kenya Uwezo Fund, which also struggled with political interference and a lack of sustained oversight for targeted group lending (Sikowa, 2023; Koske *et al*., 2025) [66, 23]. These regional comparisons suggest that sustained poverty reduction in East Africa hinges not on the quantity of capital disbursed, but on the quality of participatory governance and the institutional safeguards put in place to ensure that capital is converted into meaningful capabilities.

5. Conclusion

The study concluded that the five poverty alleviation programs in Mbale District have had a mixed but overall average to moderately high impact on poverty reduction. While significant progress has been made, the desired level of effectiveness has not been fully achieved. The regression analysis provided strong evidence that NAADS, OWC, and PDM are statistically significant in their positive effect on poverty reduction. In particular, PDM emerged as the most influential predictor, underscoring the potential of grassroots-focused initiatives. Conversely, Entandikwa and Emyooga did not show a significant effect in the final regression model. The study can therefore conclude that these programs have, to varying degrees, contributed to the reduction of poverty in Mbale, with the most recent, community-centered models showing the strongest evidence of impact.

6. Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, it is recommended that policymakers prioritize and scale up funding for poverty alleviation programs that empower communities at the grassroots level, particularly those that replicate the key success factors of the Parish Development Model (PDM). The regression analysis provided strong evidence that PDM, NAADS, and OWC are statistically significant in their positive effect on poverty reduction, suggesting that these models are more effective. To improve the long-term viability and impact of all programs, the government must move beyond rhetoric and ensure that communities are genuinely involved in the design, implementation, and monitoring of these initiatives. This will foster a sense of ownership, improve program sustainability, and reduce the issues of inconsistent support and inadequate sensitization highlighted in the study. Additionally, there should be greater transparency and accountability in the disbursement of funds and distribution of materials to ensure resources are used effectively and reach the intended beneficiaries, especially for programs with lower perceived effectiveness like OWC and Emyooga.

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