Community Engagement, Awareness and Participation in Uganda's Parish Development Model: Evidence from a Community Survey

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ABSTRACT

Uganda's Parish Development Model (PDM) places the parish at the centre of planning, financial inclusion and socio-economic transformation, and relies on community mobilisation. This study examined the perceived levels of community engagement, awareness and participation in PDM implementation, and the extent to which engagement and awareness are associated with participation. A cross-sectional survey was conducted from October to December 2025 among households that had accessed PDM funds and had running projects in Jinja, Kamuli, Kaliro and Luuka districts in the Busoga sub-region of Eastern Uganda. Local Council I chairpersons purposively selected households, and research assistants administered a structured questionnaire in person, yielding 286 valid responses. The study analysed eighteen five-point Likert items using descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, Pearson correlations, multiple regression with robust standard errors and regression diagnostics, and a bootstrap mediation test. The scales were reliable (α = 0.759–0.768), and perceptions were positive (engagement M = 4.00; awareness and participation M = 3.97). Meeting involvement scored highest (M = 4.28), while awareness campaigns (M = 3.84) and community ownership (M = 3.79) scored lowest. Engagement (β = .371) and awareness (β = .415) significantly predicted participation ($p < .001$), jointly explaining 52.2% of its variance. Awareness partially mediated the engagement–participation association, carrying about 44% of the total effect (standardised indirect effect = .286; 95% bootstrap CI (.186, .405)). Diagnostic tests suggested that common method bias was unlikely to dominate the results. The study concludes that the PDM's participatory structures are visible and accessible, but participation has not fully moved beyond attendance and consultation towards influence and ownership. Because the data are self-reported, cross-sectional and drawn from beneficiary households, the findings indicate associations rather than causal effects. The paper recommends structured community feedback mechanisms, consistent communication of programme rules, inclusive participation standards and routine local monitoring.

Keywords: Parish Development Model; citizen participation; community engagement; public awareness; Uganda

INTRODUCTION

Development policy has increasingly shifted from centrally designed interventions to approaches that recognise communities as development actors (Taylor et al., 2023). Participatory development is grounded in the proposition that people affected by development decisions should have meaningful opportunities to express priorities, influence implementation and monitor results (De Lombaert et al., 2025). Classic frameworks distinguish between participation that merely provides information or consultation and higher levels in which citizens share decision-making power (Dachler & Wilpert, 2019). More recent development practice similarly emphasises locally led development, social accountability and the use of community knowledge in planning and service delivery (Baguios et al., 2021).

The global emphasis on participation is also linked to localising the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Nakiwala et al., 2024). UNDP argues that localising development requires sustained interaction between national and local actors and empowering local stakeholders, so development responds to local needs and

aspirations (Annan-Aggrey et al., 2022). Citizen engagement can also improve transparency and accountability when communities have access to information and mechanisms to provide feedback on public programmes (Sonnenfeld et al., 2024). Evidence from Uganda, for example, indicates that social accountability interventions combining community information and engagement can affect the quality of local service delivery (Fiala & Premand, 2018).

In Africa, participatory development has become particularly relevant because local governments and community institutions often serve as the interface through which citizens encounter public programmes (Lovan et al., 2017). Yet participation is not automatically effective. The literature points to persistent challenges including elite capture, unequal voice, weak information flows, limited institutional responsiveness and the possibility that participation becomes procedural rather than influential. The quality of participation therefore depends not only on whether meetings occur, but also on whether citizens receive understandable information, can express preferences, see those preferences reflected in decisions and obtain feedback on implementation (Reed et al., 2018).

Uganda has pursued decentralisation for several decades, with participation and democratic control embedded in the rationale for transferring responsibilities to lower levels of government (Green, 2018). UNDP's review of decentralisation in Uganda identifies empowerment, improved service delivery, transparency and accountability as important objectives of the decentralisation process (Kyohairwe et al., 2024). The PDM represents a further attempt to bring development planning and economic transformation closer to households. The government describes the parish as the lowest administrative and operational hub for planning, budgeting, reporting, and delivery, while community mobilisation and mindset change are among the model's seven pillars. Launched in 2022, the PDM aims to move households from subsistence toward the money economy while improving incomes, food security, and quality of life. Its design explicitly requires communities to organise and support efforts to identify, prioritise, and respond to local needs. This makes community engagement, awareness and participation central to the model rather than peripheral communication activities(Wabwire & Nakiwala, 2026).

Despite this policy emphasis, empirical evidence from community-level perceptions of PDM engagement remains useful for understanding whether the participatory architecture is translating into citizen involvement. This paper therefore asks: (1) What is the perceived level of community engagement, awareness and participation in PDM implementation? (2) Which aspects of engagement and awareness are comparatively strong or weak? and (3) To what extent are engagement and awareness associated with participation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising Participation

Participation is widely accepted as central to development practice, yet the term describes very different processes, from passively receiving information to shared control over decisions and resources (Dachler & Wilpert, 2019). The participatory development literature suggests that meaningful participation has at least four interrelated dimensions. The first is access to information. Citizens cannot meaningfully take part in decisions about public resources if programme rules, eligibility requirements, budgets and implementation procedures are not communicated in accessible forms, so information is the entry point that makes every other form of participation possible. The second is voice, which requires genuine opportunities for citizens to deliberate on priorities and express their preferences, including in forums where less powerful community members feel able to speak. The third is influence, meaning citizen input has an observable relationship to decisions; without it, participation risks becoming a procedural ritual rather than a means of shaping outcomes. The fourth is accountability and feedback, through which communities monitor commitments, raise grievances and receive responses from responsible institutions, closing the loop between participation and performance (Simonsen, 2018).

These dimensions are cumulative rather than interchangeable. Information without voice leaves citizens informed but silent, voice without influence produces consultation without consequence, and influence without accountability offers no assurance that agreed decisions will be implemented (Cohen & Bradford, 2017).

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According to Sharma (2025), the ladder of citizen participation remains influential because it distinguishes symbolic participation from the redistribution of decision-making power. The ladder ranges from non-participation, in the form of manipulation and therapy, through tokenism, in the form of informing, consultation and placation, to citizen power, in the form of partnership, delegated power and citizen control. This study does not use the framework as a measurement instrument, but it offers a useful interpretive lens. High meeting attendance alone does not demonstrate citizen influence, and information dissemination is necessary but not sufficient for meaningful participation.

Later scholars like Cornwall (2017) distinguished "invited spaces," which governments and agencies create for citizens to enter on terms largely set by others, from spaces that citizens create for themselves. Moreover, power cube examines how the form of power, whether visible, hidden or invisible, interacts with the type of space, whether closed, invited or claimed, and with the level of decision-making, from local to global, to shape what participation can achieve (Gaventa, 2019). McComas et al. (2020) show that participatory mechanisms vary with who participates, how participants communicate and decide, and how closely their decisions link to public action.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on two complementary theories. Social Capital Theory explains how community relationships and networks enable or constrain collective participation, while the Civic Voluntarism Model explains why individuals participate, highlighting the roles of resources, psychological engagement (including awareness) and mobilisation.

Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory holds that the networks, norms of reciprocity and trust embedded in social relationships are resources that enable people to act collectively for mutual benefit. Andriani and Christoforou (2016) treated social capital as the resources available to individuals through durable networks of relationships and stressed that access to these resources is unequally distributed. Mackie et al. (2015) emphasised how obligations, expectations, information channels, and social norms within communities make certain actions possible that would otherwise be difficult. According to Mendoza-Botelho (2013), the concept was extended to the community level, arguing that dense networks of civic engagement foster generalised trust and norms of reciprocity, which in turn improve the performance of local institutions.

Development scholars distinguish three forms of social capital. Bonding social capital refers to ties among people who share similar characteristics, such as kin, neighbours or members of the same group. Bridging social capital connects people across social divides. Linking social capital connects communities to people and institutions in positions of authority, and it matters for public programmes because it determines whether communities can access officials, information, and resources beyond their immediate circles (Claridge, 2018; Field, 2016).

Social Capital Theory is relevant to this study in three respects. First, it explains the logic of the PDM's design. By organising households into enterprise groups and channelling the Parish Revolving Fund through PDM SACCOs, the model relies on existing community ties for mobilisation, collective enterprise and peer accountability in managing funds. The theory further suggests that engagement activities may build social capital, since meetings, barazas, and group activities are not only channels of information but also occasions that create and strengthen relationships, which may in turn increase awareness and participation (Bernados Jr & Ocampo, 2024). Finally, the theory warns that social capital can both exclude and include. Strong bonding ties may concentrate benefits within established networks, and local elites with stronger linking ties to officials may dominate group formation and resource allocation (Lo & Fan, 2020).

The Civic Voluntarism Model

The Civic Voluntarism Model explains participation through three sets of factors, captured in the observation that people fail to participate because they cannot, because they do not want to, or because nobody asked them.

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Resources refer to the time, money and civic skills, such as the ability to communicate, organise and follow procedures, that participation requires. Psychological engagement encompasses interest, information, a sense of efficacy (the belief that one's participation can make a difference) and awareness of the issues at stake. Recruitment refers to the networks through which individuals are mobilised and invited to take part, including community groups, religious institutions and local leaders (Alscher et al., 2026). Resources such as time and civic skills predict participation independently of socio-economic status, and the model implies that information and recruitment can partly compensate for resource constraints (Pateman et al., 2021).

The model provides a behavioural mechanism linking the study's indicators. Engagement activities such as mobilisation meetings, sensitisation campaigns and barazas act as recruitment channels and raise awareness, which in turn should increase participation, supporting the testing of these three constructs together rather than as isolated outcomes. The model also explains unequal participation, as households with less time, lower literacy or weaker access to recruitment networks, characteristic of the PDM's subsistence target group, may participate less even where opportunities exist. Finally, because participation depends partly on being informed and asked, the model shifts attention from individual willingness to institutional design, making the scale and consistency of engagement activities key explanatory factors (Reed et al., 2018).

Evidence on Induced Participation

Empirical evidence on participatory programmes is mixed. Mansuri and Rao (2013) distinguish organic participation, which arises from civic action, from induced participation, which governments and donors promote through community-driven development, decentralisation and similar programmes. They caution that induced participation can produce mixed outcomes because it is embedded in existing social and institutional structures, so that local inequalities shape who speaks, who is heard and who benefits. Elite capture is a recurrent risk, especially where programmes channel financial resources through community structures (Musgrave & Wong, 2016). Participatory programmes need institutional safeguards, transparent rules, sustained facilitation, and deliberate efforts to include less powerful groups, along with a state commitment to respond to citizen input (Lovan et al., 2017).

Wider evidence on community-driven development points in the same direction. Participation can strengthen local capacity, improve targeting of small infrastructure, and widen inclusion, but outcomes depend heavily on programme design, local context, and the incentives of implementing institutions. Several rigorous evaluations find that such programmes deliver public goods effectively yet have limited lasting effects on broader institutional or social change (Ebrahim, 2019). Research on social accountability reaches a similar conclusion. Sonnenfeld et al. (2024) show that interventions limited to disseminating information tend to produce weak effects, whereas stronger results occur when citizen voice is combined with institutional responsiveness and the capacity to act on feedback. Information is thus a necessary starting point, but its effects depend on channels through which citizens can act on it and on institutions willing to respond.

Participation in Uganda's Decentralised Development and the PDM

Uganda has a long history of participatory development. Decentralisation under the 1995 Constitution and the Local Governments Act (1997) devolved planning and service delivery to local governments and created formal spaces for citizen involvement in bottom-up planning (Okrah, 2018). Early assessments, however, found that participation in local planning was often limited in practice, as constrained fiscal discretion and the dominance of centrally determined priorities narrowed the scope for genuine citizen influence (Penny, 2017). Later national programmes aimed at household transformation, including the National Agricultural Advisory Services and Operation Wealth Creation, faced recurring questions about targeting, community ownership and accountability, and these lessons shaped the design of subsequent initiatives (Rwamigisa et al., 2018).

The Parish Development Model, launched in 2022, is the government's latest strategy for moving subsistence households into the money economy (Asiimwe, 2025). It is organised around seven pillars: production, storage, processing, and marketing; infrastructure and economic services; financial inclusion; social services; mindset change and community mobilisation; a parish-based management information system; and governance and administration (Wabwire & Nakiwala, 2026). The model therefore combines community mobilisation,

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financial inclusion, agricultural value-chain development and governance. Official documents identify community organisation and local needs identification as mechanisms to move households toward economic transformation, and they describe the parish as the focal point for planning, implementation, and service delivery (Katusiimeh & Wamara, 2025). These arrangements create an opportunity to embed participation in local development processes. Viewed through Social Capital Theory, the PDM deliberately harnesses community networks; viewed through the Civic Voluntarism Model, it creates structured channels for mobilising citizens (Panday, 2026).

Official reports, however, have identified constraints in the scale and consistency of community engagement. A recent government monitoring report noted that only four of 18 planned regional baraza meetings were held in one reporting period, limiting wider stakeholder participation and real-time feedback (Greenberg, 2022). From the Civic Voluntarism Model perspective, these shortfalls reduce both the information available to citizens and opportunities for participation (Goetting & Becker, 2025). From the accountability literature perspective, they weaken the feedback mechanisms needed to move participation beyond tokenism (Ndlovu & Muringa, 2026).

Synthesis and Research Gap

The reviewed literature converges on three conclusions. Participation is multidimensional, encompassing information, voice, influence and accountability, and therefore cannot be captured by attendance alone. Engagement, awareness and participation are theoretically linked, since engagement activities act as recruitment and information channels that raise awareness, which in turn shapes participation. However, participation benefits are not automatic because they depend on the inclusiveness of community networks, the consistency of engagement, and the responsiveness of implementing institutions.

Much of the existing commentary on the PDM relies on administrative reports that focus on fund disbursement and coverage, and there is less systematic evidence on the quality of citizen participation or on how engagement and awareness relate to participation at the community level. This study addresses this gap by examining a linked set of engagement, awareness, and participation indicators and testing their statistical relationships using community survey data, interpreting the results through Social Capital Theory, the Civic Voluntarism Model, and Arnstein's typology of participation.

METHODS

This cross-sectional survey was conducted between October and December 2025 in Jinja, Kamuli, Kaliro, and Luuka districts in the Busoga sub-region of Eastern Uganda. The districts were purposively selected because of their high poverty levels, making them key PDM target areas. The population comprised households that had accessed PDM funds and had running projects. Local Council I (LC1) chairpersons purposively identified eligible households from village records of PDM beneficiaries, which served as the sampling frame. Of 288 questionnaires returned, 286 were complete and analysed. Because local leaders identified the beneficiaries, the sample is not representative of all households and may overstate positive perceptions. The analysis therefore focuses on relationships among constructs rather than population estimates.

Research assistants administered a structured questionnaire in person. The analysed section contained 18 five-point Likert items (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), developed from the PDM framework and the participation literature. The items measured engagement (A1–A6), awareness (B1–B6) and participation (C1–C6) in separate sections. We cleaned the data in Excel and analysed them in Stata using construct means, Cronbach's alpha (Table 1) and Pearson correlations. Participation was regressed on engagement and awareness by ordinary least squares, reporting unstandardised coefficients, standard errors, 95% confidence intervals and standardised coefficients (β). Diagnostics covered multicollinearity (VIF), heteroskedasticity (Breusch–Pagan test; Breusch & Pagan, 1979), residual normality (Shapiro–Wilk test), functional form (Ramsey RESET test; Ramsey, 1969) and influential observations (Cook's distance); because the Breusch–Pagan test indicated heteroskedasticity, heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC3) standard errors were also estimated (Long & Ervin, 2000). Mediation (engagement → awareness → participation) was tested using a percentile bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect based on 5,000 resamples (Hayes, 2018),

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supplemented by the Sobel test (Sobel, 1982). To limit common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), the questionnaire was anonymous with constructs in separate sections. In Harman's single-factor test, the first unrotated factor explained 36.1% of the variance, below the 50% threshold, and a full collinearity assessment (Kock, 2015) gave VIFs of 2.09–2.26, below the 3.3 threshold. Given the cross-sectional design, results are interpreted as associations, not causal effects.

Table 1. Reliability and descriptive statistics of the study constructs (n = 286)

Construct	Items	Mean	Cronbach's α	% responses 4–5
Engagement	6	4.00	0.759	81.7%
Awareness	6	3.97	0.768	77.7%
Participation	6	3.97	0.766	74.2%

Note. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). % responses 4–5 is the share of responses that were "agree" or "strongly agree".

Makerere University, Kampala, and the district authorities in the four districts approved the study. Research assistants introduced themselves, explained the study's purpose, sought voluntary consent, and informed respondents they could withdraw at any time. No personal identifiers were recorded, and responses were kept confidential.

FINDINGS

This section presents the results of the analysis of 286 valid responses from PDM beneficiary households in Jinja, Kamuli, Kaliro and Luuka districts. It first reports the overall levels of community engagement, awareness and participation (Figure 1), then examines item-level patterns within each construct to identify relative strengths and weaknesses (Section 4.1). It then presents correlations among the three constructs, followed by multiple regression results, diagnostic tests (Table 2), and a mediation analysis testing whether awareness links engagement to participation (Table 3) (Section 4.2). All scores are on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), so a mean above 3 means respondents agreed on average. Because the data are cross-sectional, the reported relationships are associations rather than causal effects.

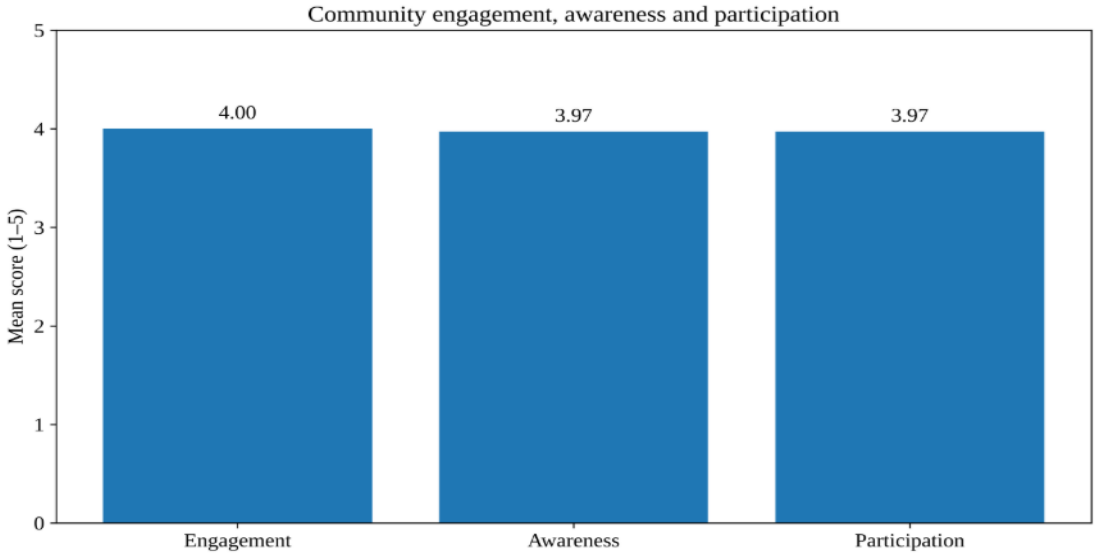


Figure 1. Mean scores for engagement, awareness and participation (five-point Likert scale).

The three constructs were rated positively overall. Engagement had the highest mean (4.00), followed closely by awareness (3.97) and participation (3.97). Across the 18 items, 81.7% of engagement responses, 77.7% of awareness responses and 74.2% of participation responses were in the agree/strongly agree range. The relatively small proportion of responses in the disagree/strongly disagree range (5.7% for engagement and

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue X October 2026

awareness, and 4.8% for participation) suggests broad positive perceptions, although the results should not be interpreted as evidence that all communities experience PDM in the same way.

Item-level patterns

Within engagement, the highest scores were for active involvement in PDM meetings and forums (M = 4.28), regular leader–citizen engagement (M = 4.20) and increased engagement since the PDM's introduction (M = 4.19), while fair consideration of all social groups' views (M = 3.83), improved trust (M = 3.76) and sufficient avenues for public discussion (M = 3.76) scored lowest. Awareness was strongest for communication of PDM rules (M = 4.03) and knowledge of its goals (M = 4.01), but weakest for the consistency and effectiveness of awareness campaigns (M = 3.84), suggesting that respondents understand the programme yet perceive communication as uneven. Participation was highest for access to participation tools for women, youth and persons with disabilities (M = 4.08), involvement in planning (M = 4.06) and attendance at fund-allocation meetings (M = 4.01), and lowest for community ownership of funded projects (M = 3.79) and public influence over project priorities (M = 3.87). Overall, participation is strong in access and involvement, while influence and ownership need further strengthening.

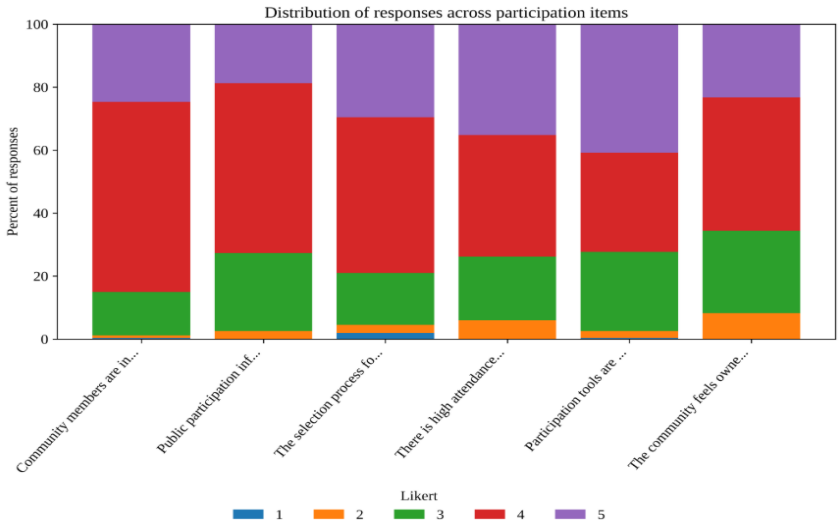


Figure 2. Distribution of Likert responses across the six participation items.

Associations and multivariable analysis

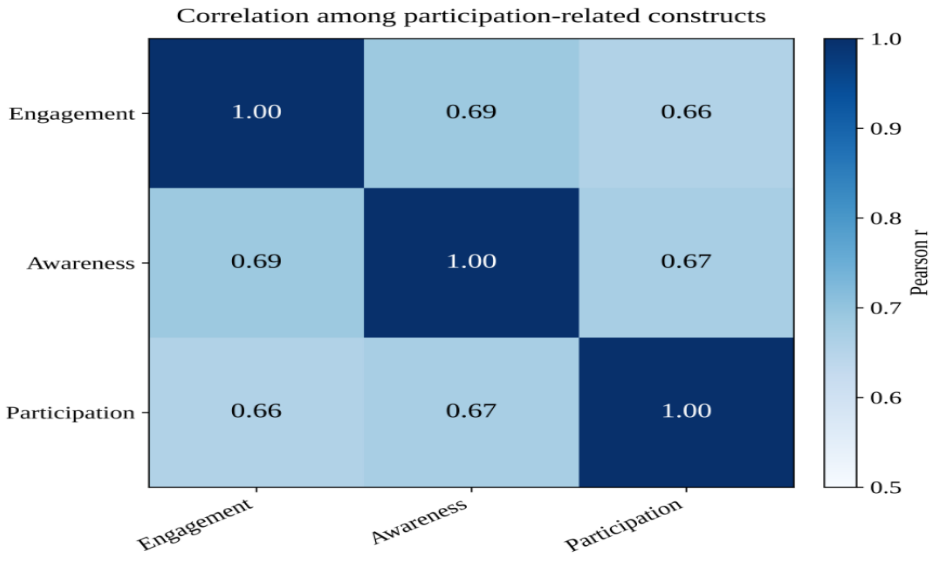


Figure 3. Pearson correlations among engagement, awareness and participation (n = 286).

Pearson correlations were first estimated on the 286 valid responses. All three scales showed acceptable internal consistency (α = 0.759–0.768). As Figure 3 shows, the constructs were strongly and positively correlated (all p < .001): engagement and awareness (r = .689), awareness and participation (r = .670), and engagement and participation (r = .657), all large effects. The strong engagement–awareness association supports the Civic Voluntarism Model's view that engagement activities such as mobilisation meetings, sensitisation sessions and barazas are channels through which citizens gain the awareness that precedes participation.

A multiple regression was then estimated with participation as the outcome (Table 2). The model was significant, F(2, 283) = 154.39, p < .001, and explained 52.2% of the variance in participation (R^2 = .522; adjusted R^2 = .518; Cohen's f^2 = 1.09). Both predictors were significant. A one-point increase in awareness was associated with a 0.43-point increase in participation (B = 0.432, 95% CI [0.315, 0.548], β = .415, p < .001), and a one-point increase in engagement with a 0.42-point increase (B = 0.418, 95% CI (0.292, 0.544), β = .371, p < .001). Awareness uniquely explained about 9.0% of the variance and engagement 7.2%, while 35.9% was shared, suggesting the two operate as mutually reinforcing parts of one participatory process. Collinearity was acceptable (VIF = 1.90; tolerance = .525), the RESET test showed no misspecification (F(1, 282) = 0.01, p = .933), and no case was unduly influential (maximum Cook's D = 0.16). The Breusch–Pagan test indicated mild heteroskedasticity ($\chi^2(2)$ = 7.23, p = .027), and the residuals departed from normality (Shapiro–Wilk W = 0.973, p < .001). With n = 286, the OLS estimates remain consistent, and both predictors stayed significant at p < .001 with HC3 robust standard errors.

Table 2. Multiple regression of participation on engagement and awareness (n = 286)

Predictor	B	SE	Robust SE (HC3)	95% CI	β	t	p
Constant	0.581	0.196	0.214	(0.195, 0.966)	—	2.97	.003
Engagement	0.418	0.064	0.078	(0.292, 0.544)	.371	6.54	< .001
Awareness	0.432	0.059	0.072	(0.315, 0.548)	.415	7.32	< .001

Note. Dependent variable: participation. B = unstandardised coefficient; β = standardised coefficient. R^2 = .522; adjusted R^2 = .518; F(2, 283) = 154.39, p < .001. Diagnostics: VIF = 1.90 (tolerance = .525); Breusch–Pagan $\chi^2(2)$ = 7.23, p = .027; Shapiro–Wilk W = 0.973, p < .001; Ramsey RESET F(1, 282) = 0.01, p = .933; maximum Cook's D = 0.16. Robust SE = heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC3) standard errors; both predictors remain significant at p < .001 with robust SEs.

A formal mediation analysis then tested whether awareness carries part of the engagement–participation association (Table 3). Engagement was positively associated with awareness (a = 0.747, SE = 0.047, p < .001), and awareness was associated with participation after controlling for engagement (b = 0.432, SE = 0.059, p < .001). The indirect effect was 0.322 (bootstrap SE = 0.072, 95% CI (0.201, 0.480); standardised effect = .286, 95% CI (.186, .405)), and the Sobel test agreed (z = 6.66, p < .001). Because the direct effect also remained significant (c′ = 0.418, p < .001), awareness partially mediated the association, accounting for about 43.5% of the total effect (c = 0.741). Given the cross-sectional design, this indirect effect is consistent with the hypothesised pathway but does not establish a causal sequence.

Table 3. Mediation of the engagement–participation association by awareness (n = 286)

Path	Effect	SE	95% CI	p
a: Engagement → Awareness	0.747	0.047	(0.655, 0.839)	< .001
b: Awareness → Participation (controlling for engagement)	0.432	0.059	(0.315, 0.548)	< .001
c: Total effect of engagement	0.741	0.050	(0.641, 0.840)	< .001
c′: Direct effect of engagement	0.418	0.064	(0.292, 0.544)	< .001
a × b: Indirect effect via awareness	0.322	0.072[a]	(0.201, 0.480)[a]	< .001[b]
Standardised indirect effect	.286	—	(.186, .405)[a]	—

Note. Unstandardised coefficients unless stated. [a] Percentile bootstrap, 5,000 resamples. [b] Sobel z = 6.66.

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Proportion of the total effect mediated = 43.5%.

These results indicate that information is a foundational condition for participation, while being mobilised and invited matters beyond being informed. The item-level results add a qualification. Awareness campaigns scored lower (M = 3.84) than meeting involvement (M = 4.28), so the stronger predictor is currently the weaker channel. Similarly, participation tools were rated accessible (M = 4.08), but community ownership scored lower (M = 3.79), suggesting that in Arnstein's (1969) terms, participation reflects attendance and consultation more than influence. This is consistent with the shortfall in baraza meetings reported by the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (2025).

Three limitations apply. The cross-sectional design establishes association rather than causation, and participation may itself increase engagement and awareness. Because all constructs were self-reported in a single survey, common-method variance may inflate the correlations, although Harman's test and the full collinearity assessment (Section 3) suggest it is not a dominant source of the observed associations. Finally, 47.8% of the variance in participation remained unexplained, pointing to factors such as household resources, social networks, gender, education and institutional responsiveness.

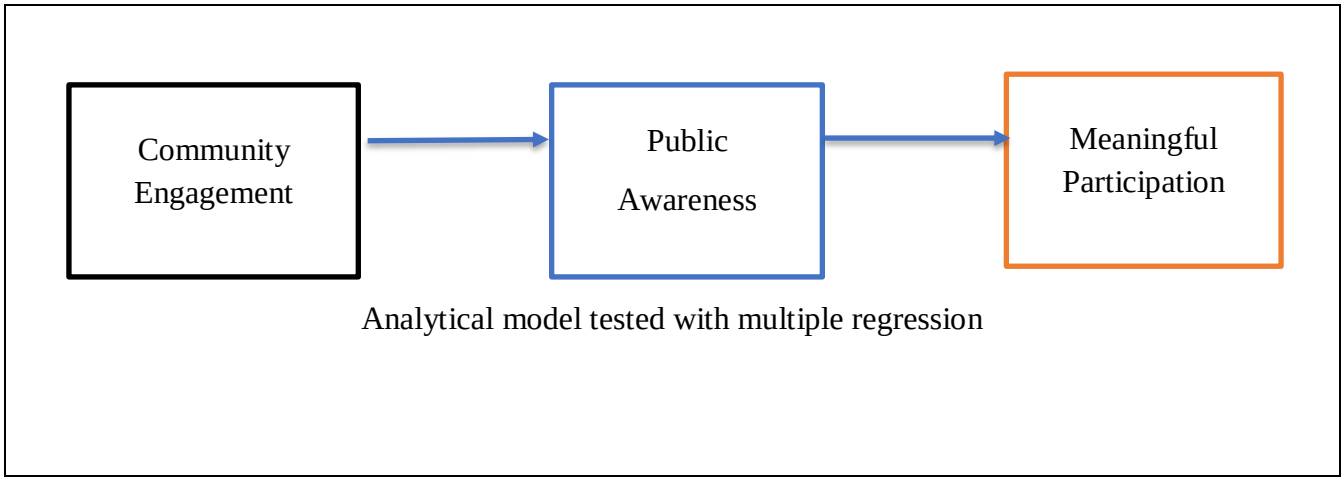


Figure 4. Analytical pathway used in the study. Arrows represent tested statistical associations, not causal mechanisms.

DISCUSSION

Visibility of the PDM's Participatory Architecture

The positive overall scores, with means of 4.00 for engagement and 3.97 for both awareness and participation, suggest that the PDM's participatory architecture is visible at the community level among the respondents in this study. This is consistent with Kayizzi-Mugerwa (2024), whose model's institutional design identifies community mobilisation and local priority setting as core implementation components and positions the parish as the focal point for planning and service delivery. Uganda's earlier experience with decentralisation is a useful comparison. El Moussaoui (2023) found that formal spaces for bottom-up planning often had limited practical meaning for citizens. The present findings suggest that the PDM has at least made its participatory structures known and accessible. Whether this visibility translates into substantive participation is a separate question, and the remainder of this discussion addresses it.

The finding that engagement and awareness are both strongly associated with participation is consistent with participatory governance theory. Citizens need opportunities to interact with public institutions, and they also need enough information to understand how to act within those opportunities. The regression results refine this general proposition in two ways. First, awareness was the stronger predictor (β = .415), supporting the view that information is a foundational condition for participation. This aligns with the psychological engagement component of the Civic Voluntarism Model as stated by Penker and Kirbiš (2026) in which knowledge of the issues and procedures at stake shapes whether citizens take part. Second, engagement retained a substantial

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independent association with participation (β = .371) even after awareness was controlled for. This suggests that being mobilised and invited, the recruitment component of the same model, matters beyond simply being informed. The two predictors also shared most of the explained variance. This indicates that engagement and awareness operate as mutually reinforcing dimensions of a single participatory process rather than as alternative routes to participation. In practice, well-designed engagement activities are likely to raise awareness at the same time, and awareness campaigns are most effective when linked to concrete opportunities for interaction.

From Interaction to Deliberation and Trust

Active involvement in PDM meetings received the highest engagement score (M = 4.28), while discussion channels and trust scored lower. The programme has therefore been effective at convening citizens, but convening has not necessarily produced deeper deliberation or confidence in institutions. In Arnstein's (1969) terms, informing and consultation remain forms of tokenism rather than partnership. The lower score for participation's influence on project priorities suggests that, for many respondents, participation sits closer to attendance than to influence. This pattern reflects the nature of PDM meetings as invited spaces whose agenda and procedures are largely set by government (Cohen & Bradford, 2017). Less visible forms of power may also determine whose priorities prevail (De Lombaert et al., 2025). Lower trust matters because trust is both an outcome and a precondition of collective action Alscher et al. (2026), and weak trust may discourage citizens from deliberating or holding leaders accountable. The lower score for awareness campaigns (M = 3.84) is also significant because awareness was the stronger predictor of participation. Together with the government's report that only four of 18 planned regional barazas were held in one period David (2026). This suggests that inconsistent communication and feedback may be limiting participation depth.

Inclusion, Ownership and Influence

The relatively high score for accessible participation tools (M = 4.08) suggests genuine efforts to include women, youth and persons with disabilities. This is encouraging, given the time, literacy and network constraints that subsistence households face. However, the lower score for community ownership of PDM-funded projects (M = 3.79) indicates that access has not yet translated into ownership. This is consistent with evidence that participatory programmes can include vulnerable groups without increasing their influence over decisions (Bernados Jr & Ocampo, 2024). When resources flow through community groups and SACCOs, people with stronger ties to leaders may shape group formation and fund allocation, while others may be present but less influential (Kayizzi-Mugerwa, 2024). Inclusion should therefore be assessed by who participates, how decisions are made and how closely those decisions shape the use of public resources (Fung, 2006).

Interpreting the Statistical Model

The R^2 of 0.522 indicates substantial shared variance between participation and the two predictors, but the cross-sectional design does not establish that increasing awareness will mechanically cause participation to rise. The relationships may run in more than one direction. Active participants may become more engaged and better informed through that participation. In addition, because all three constructs were measured through self-report in the same survey, part of the observed association may reflect common-method variance. Other factors may also influence engagement, awareness and participation. These include the quality of local leadership, institutional capacity at the parish level, socio-economic characteristics such as income, education and gender, length of exposure to the programme, and trust in implementing institutions. This study did not include these factors in the dataset analysed. Future research should incorporate them, ideally through longitudinal or mixed methods designs that can trace how participation develops over time and capture citizens' own accounts of whether their input has influenced decisions. Studies comparing parishes with different levels of engagement activity would also help determine whether the observed associations reflect the effects of programme implementation.

Contribution of the Study

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to the emerging evidence on the PDM. Much existing commentary on the programme relies on administrative data about disbursement and coverage. This study offers survey-based evidence on how citizens experience its participatory components. By examining engagement, awareness and participation as a linked set of indicators, rather than relying on attendance alone, it shows that the PDM's participatory structures are visible and associated with participation. It also shows that the movement from attendance and consultation towards ownership, influence and feedback remains incomplete. Strengthening that movement is likely to be central to whether the PDM achieves its aim of community-driven socio-economic transformation.

CONCLUSION

Using survey data from 286 respondents, this study examined how community engagement and awareness relate to participation in Uganda's Parish Development Model. Together, engagement and awareness explained 52.2% of the variance in participation, with awareness the stronger predictor, suggesting citizens participate more when well informed and actively mobilised. However, participation has not fully moved beyond attendance and consultation: meeting involvement and accessible tools scored highly, while discussion channels, influence over priorities, and community ownership scored lower. In Arnstein's terms, the PDM succeeds at informing and consultation but falls short of shared decision-making, and inclusive access has not yet produced inclusive influence. Implementation should therefore strengthen the progression from access to voice, influence and ownership through structured feedback mechanisms, consistent communication, inclusive participation standards and routine local monitoring. As the data are cross-sectional and self-reported, the findings show association rather than causation; future research should examine leadership, institutional capacity, socio-economic factors and trust.

Policy Implications

The findings point to several policy implications for strengthening participation in the Parish Development Model. Standardise community feedback loops so that every major planning or allocation process records the issues citizens raise, officials' responses, and the actions taken; this would make the link between participation and decision-making visible and strengthen accountability. Because awareness was the stronger predictor of participation, yet awareness campaigns scored lower than meeting involvement, communication should be more consistent and use repeated, locally accessible channels such as local radio, notice boards, religious gatherings and local languages to explain programme rules, responsibilities, timelines and grievance pathways. Monitoring frameworks should measure influence, not just attendance, by tracking whether community priorities shape the selection of projects and enterprises. Although participation tools were seen as accessible to women, youth and persons with disabilities, inclusion should be deepened by tracking whether these groups' perspectives shape priorities and resource allocation. Participation should also be linked to ownership through clear information on project responsibilities, maintenance arrangements and community roles after funding ends. Finally, aggregate routine parish-level feedback at district and national levels to identify where communication, trust, or perceived influence is weakening, allowing implementers to adjust engagement strategies during implementation rather than only after evaluation.

Declarations

Ethical approval

This study involved human participants. Approval to conduct the research was granted by Makerere University, Kampala, and by the district authorities of Jinja, Kamuli, Kaliro and Luuka districts. All respondents gave informed consent before taking part, as described in Section 3.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data availability

The data are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. They are not publicly shared to protect respondents' confidentiality.

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APPENDIX 1

Pdm Community Engagement Questionnaire

Introduction and informed consent

Study title: Community Engagement, Awareness and Participation in Uganda's Parish Development Model (PDM)

Researcher: Dr. Margaret Nakiwala, CEDAT, Makerere University, Kampala (maggienakiwala22@gmail.com)

To be read aloud by the research assistant before the interview begins.

Dear Respondent,

My name is _____, and I am a research assistant working with Dr. Margaret Nakiwala. We are carrying out a study to understand the effectiveness of the Parish Development Model in Jinja, Kamuli, Kaliro and Luuka districts. In particular, we want to learn how households take part in PDM activities, how well informed they are about the programme, and how involved they are in decisions about PDM projects.

Your household has been selected because it has accessed PDM funds and has a running project. Your experience is therefore very important to this study. The questionnaire will take about 20–30 minutes.

Please note the following:

- **Voluntary participation:** Taking part is entirely your choice. You may refuse to take part, skip any question or stop at any time, and this will not affect your PDM benefits or your relationship with local leaders in any way.

- **Confidentiality:** We will not record your name or any details that can identify you. Your answers will be combined with those of other respondents and used only for research purposes.

- **No right or wrong answers:** We are interested in your honest opinion. Please answer freely and truthfully, based on your own experience.

- **Risks and benefits:** There are no known risks in taking part, and there is no payment. The findings are expected to help government and local leaders improve how the PDM is implemented.

- **Approval:** This study has been approved by Makerere University, Kampala, and by the district authorities of Jinja, Kamuli, Kaliro and Luuka districts.

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- **Questions:** If you have any questions about the study, you may ask me now or contact the researcher using the email address above.

Consent

I have been told the purpose of this study, and I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time. I willingly agree to take part.

- ☐ Yes, I agree to participate
- ☐ No, I do not wish to participate (end the interview and thank the respondent)

Respondent's signature or thumbprint: _____ Date: _____

Research assistant's name and signature: _____

Questionnaire number: _____ District: _____ Parish: _____

Section A: Background information

Please tick (✓) the option that applies to you.

1. **Sex:** ☐ Male ☐ Female
2. **Age group:** ☐ 18–24 ☐ 25–34 ☐ 35–44 ☐ 45–54 ☐ 55 and above
3. **Highest level of education:** ☐ None ☐ Primary ☐ Secondary ☐ Tertiary/University
4. **Position in household:** ☐ Household head ☐ Spouse ☐ Other adult member
5. **Role in PDM:** ☐ Beneficiary only ☐ Enterprise group member ☐ PDM SACCO leader ☐ Other (specify): _____
6. **Type of PDM-funded project:** ☐ Crop farming ☐ Livestock/poultry ☐ Fisheries ☐ Trade/small business ☐ Other (specify): _____
7. **When did your household first receive PDM funds?** ☐ 2022 ☐ 2023 ☐ 2024 ☐ 2025

Section B: Community engagement

For each statement, tick the number that best shows how much you agree: **1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Not sure, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree.**

No.	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
A1	Community members are actively involved in PDM-related meetings and forums.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A2	Local leaders regularly engage with citizens regarding PDM implementation.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A3	There are sufficient ways for public discussion about community priorities.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A4	Mobilisation efforts have improved citizen trust in local government initiatives.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A5	Engagement activities consider the views of all social groups fairly.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A6	The level of engagement with citizens has increased since the introduction of the PDM fund.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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Section C: Awareness of the PDM

Use the same scale: **1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Not sure, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree.**

No.	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
B1	Citizens are aware of the goals and objectives of the Parish Development Model fund.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
B2	Community awareness campaigns about the PDM are consistent and effective.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
B3	Local media adequately disseminate PDM-related information.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
B4	The PDM fund rules are clearly communicated to the public.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
B5	Training meetings have improved public understanding of the PDM fund.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
B6	Awareness of funding procedures has improved transparency in implementation.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Section D: Participation in PDM implementation

Use the same scale: **1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Not sure, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree.**

No.	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
C1	Community members are involved in the planning of PDM fund activities.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
C2	Public participation influences the priorities of funded development projects.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
C3	The selection process for PDM SACCO members is inclusive and fair.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
C4	There is high attendance at community meetings discussing fund allocation.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
C5	Participation tools are accessible to women, youth and persons with disabilities.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
C6	The community feels ownership of PDM-funded projects.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Closing

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with the PDM?

To be read aloud: Thank you very much for your time and honest responses. Your answers will remain confidential and will help improve how the Parish Development Model is implemented in your community.

Research assistant checklist

- ☐ Consent obtained before the interview
- ☐ No name or identifying details written on the questionnaire
- ☐ All items in Sections B–D answered (or skipped by the respondent's choice)
- ☐ Questionnaire number, district and parish recorded

END

Thank You Very Much for Your Participation