

Are political leaders in local governments effective? Gendered perceptions from leaders and communities

Executive summary

Effective representation of local leaders in politics increases ownership of government policies and programmes. Using data from local government leaders and communities they represent, the brief examines the extent to which the elected leaders in LGs perform their official roles and responsibilities. Findings reveal that men and women leaders exhibited varying performance at the different LG levels. Leaders blame other factors for their failures: (a) Lack of transport means; (b) Delayed disbursement of funds from central government to LGs. Whereas people in the communities blame the leaders for their failures. For leaders to effectively perform their roles, government should: (a) release funds on a timely basis, (b) facilitate LG leaders with transport means to monitor activities, (c) strengthen avenues through which leaders and communities can interact, and (d) strengthen OPM's oversight and reach out roles to curb corruption and misappropriation of project resources.

Introduction

Political representation in local decision-making processes is critical for prioritizing citizens' needs and issues in local governments' agenda and for localizing the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Uganda is committed to ensuring effective representation at all decision-making levels in local political levels through its local government (LG) act 1997 which stipulates the various roles and responsibilities of local leaders at different levels. Effective representation of local leaders in politics increases ownership of government policies and programmes; provides information about citizens' views on salient issues at stake; provides information about the interests of certain groups of citizens which create checks and balances in the representative system; influences equality in the context of seeking to influence policy given the fact that in their absence some actors enjoy more resources, capabilities and access to decision-makers than others (UBoS, 2017; Van de Bovenkamp & Vollaard, 2019); iKNOW Politics, 2018).

Despite the benefits, the effectiveness of leaders at LGs levels has not been assessed. In Uganda, a few studies that have attempted to examine participation in politics in local governments have often overlooked the issue of effective representation. UBoS conducted

a baseline on gender representation in LGs in 2017, but it covered the period immediately after the 2016 national elections which was too early to properly assess the effectiveness in representation, particularly for leaders (both men and women) occupying leadership positions for the first time. In addition, FOWODE assessed national commitment to promoting women's presence and participation in leadership and decision-making positions in 2020 but did not examine the effectiveness of local leaders. Against the above background, EPRC in collaboration with UN Women, undertook a successor survey to address the above gap. Most especially to capture information about effective representation by men and women local council leaders since by the time of the study (September 2020), they have been in office for a reasonable time (over three years).

A representative is considered effective if the particular group she represents judges her as such (Hester M. van de Bovenkamp & Hans Vollaard, 2019 and Stanus, 2016). In political representation arena, there are representatives, the represented, relevant audiences and rules and roles by which the represented group judge whether their leader is a representative. In this brief, we focus on the representational role of the elected leaders which comprises of the

expectations from the voters related to the roles and obligations connected with leaders' position in LG. In the context of this study, effective representation refers to the extent to which the elected leaders in LGs perform their official roles and responsibilities. Using data from local government leaders and communities they represent; this policy brief examines the performance of leaders at different levels and various factors that influenced their effectiveness in delivering on their mandates. It further provides interventions required for leaders to effectively perform their roles and responsibilities.

Methods

The policy brief is an extract from a study on "Women's Participation in Politics at the Local Government Level in Uganda" (EPRC Occasional Paper No. 53). This policy brief makes use of primary survey data collected through key informant interviews with political leaders at the LG levels and focus group discussions with community people. The survey was conducted in September 2020 in Gulu, Nwoya, and Pader in the North; Napak and Moroto in Karamoja sub-region; Pallisa and Bugiri in the East; and Kiryandongo in the West. A clear understanding of the leaders' official roles and responsibilities is necessary for leaders to serve the people they represent effectively. To assess whether leaders in their various positions understood what is expected of them, they were asked to

mention their roles and responsibilities as an indication that they knew what is expected of them in the various capacities they serve. Similarly, we assessed community members' knowledge regarding the roles and responsibilities of their leaders.

To assess the extent to which men and women leaders effectively perform their roles and responsibilities (as a proxy for effective performance) in LGs, the study applied a three step methodology while interviewing the appropriate respondents: (a) Self-assessment (leaders' own assessment) which involved rating of leaders by the leaders themselves on the rate at which they fulfil their roles and responsibilities; (b) Assessment of leaders on fellow leaders' performance; and (c) Assessment of the leaders by the communities they represent.

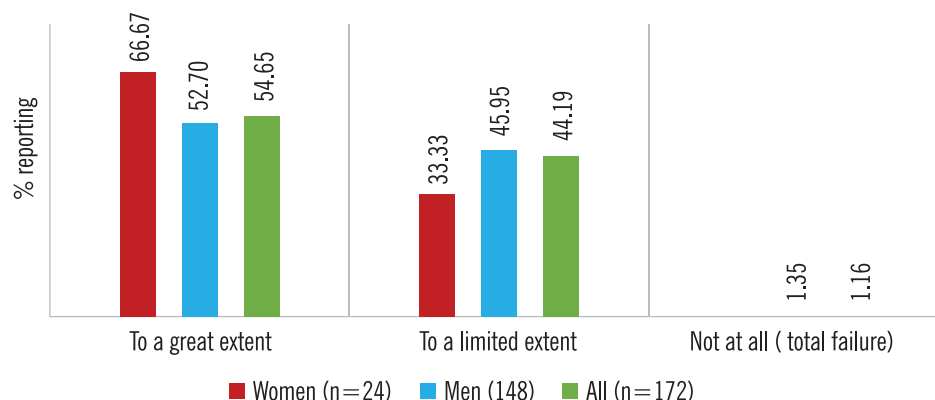
Leaders in Local governments are aware of their roles and responsibilities

Leaders in LGs knew what is expected of them in the various capacities they serve (Table 1). The most frequently reported role by LCV Chairpersons, LCIII Chairpersons and Councillors was to supervise and monitor programmes supported by both state and non-state actors. At lower LG levels, the most reported role/responsibility by LCII and LCI Chairpersons was to resolve conflicts in their areas of jurisdiction.

Table 1 Roles and responsibilities of local leaders at different levels (% responses)

Role/responsibility	LCV Chairpersons (n=8)	LC III Chairpersons (n=35)	LC II Chairpersons (n=28)	LC I Chairpersons (n=66)	Councillors (n=35)
Supervise and monitor both government and NGOs programmes	87.50	80.00	64.29	43.94	80.00
Attend council meetings	50.00		17.86	10.61	22.86
Plan, discuss and pass budgets	50.00	54.29	10.71	6.06	40.00
Foster and keep security, law and order	50.00	22.86	32.14	53.03	17.14
Communicate peoples demands/needs	37.50	48.57	25.00	51.52	57.14
Community sensitization on development issues	25.00	37.14	39.29	62.12	37.14
Monitor technical personnel	25.00				
Resolve conflicts	12.50	14.29	78.57	63.64	8.57
Monitor technical personnel		14.29			8.57
The linkage between the sub-county and district		14.29	17.86	21.21	28.57
Uphold and protect the constitution	5.71	5.71	3.57	6.06	5.71

Source: 2020 Women in Local Governments Survey – Key Informant Interviews

Figure 1 Self-rating on the extent of fulfilment of roles and responsibilities

Source: 2020 Women in Local Governments Survey – Key informant interviews

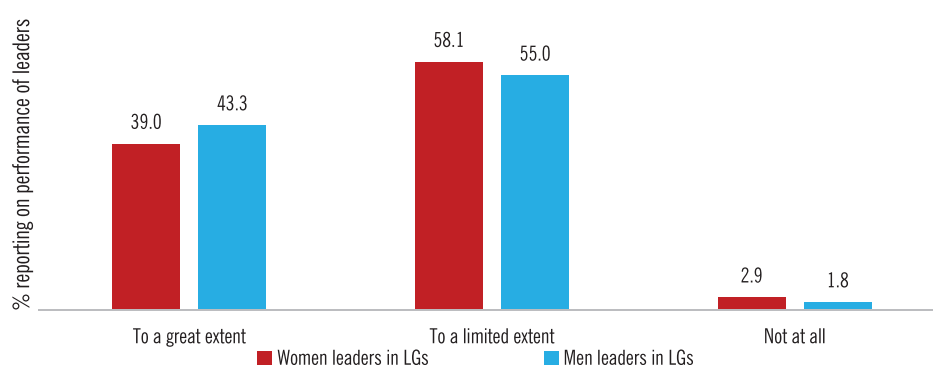
Self-assessment results revealed that more women than men believe that they are effective leaders.

Comparatively more women (66.7%) than men (52.7%) rated themselves very well i.e., to a great extent, they fulfil their roles and responsibilities. On the other hand, no woman, and a negligible percentage of men (1.4%) reported total failure to fulfil their roles and responsibilities as leaders (Figure 1).

Contrary to the self-assessment results, male leaders are perceived by other leaders to be better performers than their female counterparts.

Individual political leaders were asked to provide their opinion about the general performance of men and women leaders; the findings

of leaders assessing other political leaders are contrary to the self-reported performance presented in Figure 1. While with self-reported performance assessment women leaders ranked themselves better than men, results in Figure 2 indicate that male leaders are generally perceived to be better performers than women. When asked to comment on the performance of men and women political leaders, at least 43 percent of the interviewed political leaders in LGs said to a great extent, men fully and effectively undertake their roles and responsibilities compared to about 39 percent of the respondents who gave the same report about women leaders. Correspondingly, more respondents (about 3%) believed that women leaders have failed to undertake their roles and responsibilities than those (about 2%) who said the same about men leaders in LGs.

Figure 2 Perceived extent to which political leaders in LGs fulfil their mandates

Source: 2020 Women in Local Governments Survey – Key informant interviews

The primary reasons that have enabled their political leaders to fulfil their roles and responsibilities, at least to some extent were generally the same for all categories of leaders and these include: the leaders' ability to mobilise and coordinate people to participate in government projects/programmes; being cooperative and maintaining good working relations with the people; having good working relations with fellow leaders; being approachable, listening to people's views and taking the necessary action; always attending council meetings; supportive communities; being accessible and available to offer services - most of them reside within the community; being honest; long experience in the same positions; funding from both local revenue collections and the central government to support project implementation; and zero tolerance to corruption.

On the other hand, key factors that limit the effectiveness of political leaders in LGs are similar for both men and women and include: inadequate funding for operations and project implementation, lack of transport means which hinders monitoring of ongoing activities, delayed release of funds to LGs, which sometimes leads to implementation failure, lack of cooperation among the people in the communities, and misunderstandings among political leaders which frustrate or stall project implementation processes (Table 2)

Apparently, in lower-level positions (LCI & LCII) women perform better than men. However, at higher decision-making levels (LCIII & Councilors), men perform better.

To check whether the leaders were not overrating their performance, community members, through focus group discussions, were asked to rate the performance of the leaders. First, community members'

knowledge regarding the roles and responsibilities of their leaders revealed much similar findings to what the leaders stated (Table 1), an indication that they truly understand what their leaders are meant to do while in office. In addition, the results presented in Table 3 revealed that LC I chairpersons were ranked better than leaders at higher administrative levels; the majority (77.5% and 67.4% of the FGD participants reported that women and men LCI Chairpersons, respectively, have to a great extent fulfilled their roles and responsibilities. At the LC II level, findings revealed that women leaders' performance at this level is exceptional (100% great extent. Furthermore, both men and women LC III chairpersons fulfil their roles and responsibilities to a limited extent. Generally compared with other leaders, councillors were ranked the poorest performers, with more than half (51%) and 40% of women and men councillors respectively totally failing to fulfil their roles and responsibilities.

Table 2 Top 10 challenges (leaders' views) that limit leaders' ability to perform their roles and responsibilities effectively

Challenges	% responses		
	All (n = 172)	Women (n = 24)	Men (n = 148)
Limited funds for operations and project implementation	51.7	50.0	52.0
Lack of transport means to monitor community activities	44.8	29.2	47.3
Delayed release of funds from the central government	25.0	29.2	24.3
Lack of cooperation from community members	17.4	25.0	16.2
Misunderstandings among leaders	15.7	12.5	16.2
Poor attitude of other people within the community	9.3	8.3	9.5
Council members are demotivated – no salary	9.3	8.3	9.5
Sickness	8.7	4.2	9.5
Lack of enough information on the local government Act	7.6	4.2	8.1
Wide area of operation	7.0	8.3	6.8

Source: 2020 Women in Local Governments Survey – Key informant interviews

Table 3 Performance of leaders by LG position as perceived by communities

Position	Sex of leader	% reporting on the level of the leader's performance		
		To a great extent	To a limited extent	Not at all
LC I Chairpersons	Women	77.5	22.5	0.0
	Men	67.4	30.9	2.5
LC II Chairpersons	Women	100.0	0.0	0.0
	Men	29.6	32.7	37.9
LC III Chairpersons	Women	5.0	92.5	2.5
	Men	37.7	43.8	18.7
LC V Chairpersons	Men	31.4	28.4	40.4
Councilors	Women	15.7	33.1	51.2
	Men	20.4	39.6	40.0

Source: 2020 Women in Local Governments Survey – FGDs

Communities attribute the complete failure of some leaders to the following reasons: (a) absenteeism, some leaders are rare on the ground and do not gather information on people's challenges, needs and possible solutions; (b) Some leaders never provide feedback to community members after council meetings. Some FGD participants lamented that;

"Some leaders especially councilors stop at attending council meetings and receiving their allowances, they never organize meetings to provide feedback from the meetings."

(c) Some leaders are not approachable, they confine themselves to their offices and do not cooperate with the people in the community; (d) Some are corrupt and misappropriate project funds and other resources during project implementation; and (e) others do not exercise fairness in implementing projects in the community; some areas are continuously left out (neglected) in service delivery.

Conclusion

Apparently, it is at lower leadership positions (LCI & LCII) that women leaders are most effective. Nonetheless, compared to men, women leaders (except councillors) who have completely failed to fulfil their roles and responsibilities are fewer. Leaders blame other factors for their failures namely Limited funding, Lack of transport means and Delayed disbursement of funds from central government to LGs. On the contrary, people in the communities blame the leaders – they say "Leaders are responsible for their failures" because they; are not approachable, do not communicate to the people they represent, are corrupt, and Practice nepotism & unfairness.

Priority actions for policy consideration

- a) **Timely and adequate release of funds from the central government to facilitate activities.** The insufficient central government transfers not only reduce the LG leaders' capacity to integrate communities into local development projects but also affects the LGs' responsiveness to community needs, which sometimes leads to implementation failure
- b) **Facilitate LG leaders with transport means.** Given that lack of transport means to monitor community activities was one of the main reasons for failure to deliver on leaders' roles and responsibilities, government should provide leaders especially at the lowest administrative levels with transport means to conduct field visits and monitor government programmes throughout their areas of jurisdiction. This will increase leaders' ability to listen to peoples' views, mobilise and coordinate people to participate in government projects/programmes.
- c) **Encourage wise voting by empowering people not to vote for unserious leaders again when their term of office expires.** Following the study finding that some leaders are not approachable and do not cooperate with the people, the latter

should be educated/empowered not to vote such leaders again when their term of office expires.

- d) **Strengthen avenues through which leaders and communities can interact.** Ongoing efforts by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) such as Barazas, radio talk shows should be organised more frequently and at various administrative levels in local governments to enable people to give views receive feedback from their leaders. Reporting by leaders should further be encouraged through radio talk shows, and it should be supported as part of accountability to the people.
- e) **Strengthen OPM's oversight and reach out roles to curb corruption and misappropriation of project resources.** With the local leaders, OPM should communicate to target beneficiaries what is due to them and provide a reporting channel that people can use in case their leaders misbehave.

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