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## ASSESSING COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT PROJECTS AND POVERTY REDUCTION IN RWANDA: CASE STUDY OF SPARK MICROGRANT IN RULINDO DISTRICT, 2018-2021

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### ABSTRACT

*A cross-sectional study was carried out with the objective to evaluate the impact of community empowerment projects on poverty reduction in Rwanda, with the example taken on the project implemented by Spark MicroGrant from 2018 to 2021 in Rulindo District. This study was conducted on beneficiaries of the project and the local leaders, using a mixed approach. In total, 371 respondents participated in this study. The majority were women with 78,98%, spouses of heads of households in 72.78%, married (90.3%), they practiced agriculture in 93.53% of all respondents, and had mainly completed only the primary school in 80.59%. All respondents declared to be satisfied with the services received during the project, and different services related to microgrants, capacity building, and community leadership scored 4.3, 3.83,*

*and 4.29 respectively on a scale of 5. The most developed aspects of life were the improvement of health, participation in government programs, and social integration which scored 5 on a scale of 5, while aspects that scored less were the acquisition of vehicles and business improvement with 1.9 and 2.32 on a scale of 5 respectively. In general, the project contributed to the overall poverty reduction, and different services provided also contributed individually to the particular poverty reduction. Moreover, other community empowerment programs such as "Ubudehe" and "Girinka" contribute mainly to poverty reduction. The local leaders play a crucial role in encouraging citizens to adopt poverty-reduction behaviors. There is a need of pursuing research, especially on gender involvement in community development.*

**Keywords:** community, empowerment, poverty, reduction

## Introduction

Community empowerment projects have been used in different countries to upgrade communities from poverty.

In fact, empowerment combines different interventions made towards the community to equip its members with the skills and means needed to allow them to achieve their own autonomy and self-determination. The term “empowerment” has been used since the 1960s in the USA, referring to the ability of individuals and groups to act in order to ensure their own well-being or the right to participate in decision-making that concerns them.

Those principles have for a long time directed research on social interventions mainly to the most vulnerable, which means the poorest and marginalized communities (Calves, 2009). Afterward, that term was extensively used by the United Nations, World Bank, and other political institutions.

The community is also a term difficult to define, but it is mainly understood as a group of people sharing a living place, having joint actions, socializing, but also diverse (Cobigo et al., 2016; MacQueen et al., 2001).

Thus, community empowerment is a continuous and structured process involving the participation of communities in the planning of the activities to be implemented, with the purpose to make communities more resilient, safer, and a better place to live, and it is important for any strategy of community empowerment to acknowledge the uniqueness of the place and the specific needs of the community occupants to succeed in achieving its stated objectives (Grimm, 2011).

Rwanda is a Low-Income Country aspiring to become a Middle Income Country by 2035 and a High Income Country by 2050 (WB, 2021). One of the strategies put in place by the

Government to achieve these targets is to develop human capital through “community empowerment” programs and projects.

In fact, after the Genocide against the Tutsi in 1994, the development strategies in Rwanda mainly focused on recovery, and the introduction of the “Vision 2020” and “Vision 2050” after, embarked the country on economic development (GoR, 2020).

To respond to the consistent challenge of poverty and inequality, the Government of Rwanda and its partners and stakeholders introduced programs of community empowerment. The most important of them are “Vision 2020”, the “Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategies” (EDPRS), gender equity initiatives, mutual health insurance scheme, civic education academy (“*Itorero*”), community rehabilitation and development projects, an agricultural program such as “Girinka program”, “Vision 2020 Umurenge Program” (VUP), Umurenge and Umwarimu Saving and Credit Cooperatives (SACCO), education programs including the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET), infrastructure development and homegrown solutions (public work “*umuganda*”, “*Ubudehe*”, “*abunzi*”, “*Gacaca*” courts, “*inteko z’abaturage*”... (MINALOC, 2013).

The Ministry of Local Government in Rwanda developed a Community Development Policy, which promotes the engagement of the Rwandan community in analysing their environment, defining their individual and collective needs and problems, but also their potential in terms of development, but also designing individual and collective actions that allow citizens to fulfil their needs and find solutions to their daily challenges (MINALOC, 2008).

This process of involving community in identifying and solving its needs is very important to implement the planned activities, but also monitor and sustain the activities, which makes them more productive and impactful is encouraged by organizations like United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2017).

In spite of the great improvement in the last two decades, poverty is still present and pervasive in Rwanda. Even if the poverty rate reduced from 45 percent of the national population under the poverty line in 2010/2011, and more than 24% considered extremely poor (WBG, 2015) to 39.1% and 16.3% respectively in 2014 (NISR, 2015), the poverty is still rampant in Rwanda.

In addition, the major fraction of the Rwandan population is rural, what makes them depending on agriculture, as it is the main activity practiced in rural areas. Rulindo is one of the poorest districts in Rwanda, having around 50% of its population qualified as poor, and more than 20% are extremely poor (Rulindo, 2018).

Following the above-mentioned information on poverty, the Rwandan Government in cooperation with different local and international organizations, is implementing community empowerment activities throughout the country.

Thus, Spark MicroGrant, an international Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) working in Rwanda, has implemented different community empowerment projects. This study emphasizes on the project implemented in Rulindo District from 2018 to 2021.

Despite the adoption of community empowerment programs in Rwanda, their impacts on poverty reduction were rarely

evaluated, especially the project implemented by Spark MicroGrant from 2018 to 2021 in Rulindo.

This can hinder the efforts of organizations and governments, as many projects can be implemented while they don't provide solutions, leading to the waste of resources, including time.

In addition, they would deteriorate the trust of the population to the government and its partners, making them reluctant to new development programs.

It is in this context that this study was designed with the objective to assess the impact of community empowerment on poverty reduction in Rwanda, taking example on the project implemented by Spark MicroGrant from 2018 to 2021 in Rulindo District.

### **Materials and methods**

This study was carried out in Rulindo District from June to October 2021. It was conducted in two sectors in which the project was implemented, and those sectors are Rukozo and Cyungo. It used a cross-sectional research design with a mixed approach, it means quantitative and qualitative approaches. The cross-sectional study collects information at one point of time and looks for relationship between the independent and dependent variables, using tests such as correlation or regression (Nassaji, 2015).

This study is intended to document the ideas and views of the beneficiaries on the impacts of this project by Spark Microgrant in Rulindo District.

This study was conducted on beneficiaries of Spark MicroGrant from 2018 to 2021. In total, 5080 household beneficiaries were present in two sectors of intervention, namely Rukozo and Cyungo. The sample size was calculated

based on the size of the population, as the findings are drawn to the whole population (Kabir, 2016).

The sample size calculation used the formula provided by Yamane (1967). The population size is 5080 households, the margin error is 0.05% and the confidence level of 95%.

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

(Yamane, 1967)

With:

N: study population

e: margin error (0.05)

$$n = \frac{5080}{1+5080(0.05)^2}$$

$$n = 371$$

After calculation, the sample size of 371 households was used in this study, in Rukozo and Cyungo Sectors of Rulindo District. The sampling technique used was the random sampling selection. In addition, key informants were identified to participated to this study.

Their sampling was purposeful as they were selected because they had specific information on the project. Questionnaires and interview guides were used for beneficiaries and key informants respectively.

The data processing involved the entry in Microsoft Excel and cleaning, while the qualitative data were transcribed, coded and made ready for analysis.

The data analysis was done using SPSS IBM Statistics 20 software for the analysis of quantitative data. Descriptive statistics involved calculation of averages, ranges, frequencies and the results were presented using charts and tables, while analytical statistics used the paired sample t-test and the

bivariate correlation and the linear regression tests depending on the parameter to analyze.

The confidence level was set at 95% and the precision set at 5%. For the qualitative analysis, the researcher read, understood and summarized text in quotes, according to the pre-established codes. The emerging codes were also summarized and reported too.

Some limitations changed the way the research was supposed to happen and affected the way data were collected and interpretation of results (Price & Murnan, 2004).

For this study, the availability of respondents was challenging because most of heads of households regularly go to work far from their homes, while others moved and changed the location. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions prevented the free movements, physical meetings and data collection.

## Results and discussion

Among the respondents who participated to this study, 52.8% were from Rukozo while 47.2% were from Cyungo Sector. The majority of respondents were female, as it is shown by a high percentage of 78.98%, while male represented only 21.02%. This can be explained by the fact that male usually go to work far from home, and women stay at home or work around the household.

In addition, about the relation to the head of household, most of the respondents were spouses of heads of households with 72.78%, and the heads of households were only 26.68%.

The majority of respondents were married with 90.3%, and had only the primary education with 80.59% of all respondent having completed only the primary school. The main source of income was agriculture, with 93.53%.

In total, all respondents were satisfied with the services received through the project. However, when they rated the services

received, it was found that the microgrants were the service the most appreciated, and the capacity building was the least appreciated.

Table 1: Services received during the project

		Average services	Average services	Average services
N	Valid	371	371	371
	Missing	0	0	0
Mean		4.30	3.83	4.29
Std. Deviation		0.072	0.07	0.05

Among the affected services, the health improvement, participation to government programs and social integration were the aspects of life that were highly improved, with a score of 5

out of 5. Unlike these aspects, the acquisition of vehicles and improvement of businesses were the aspects that were least developed, with 1.95 and 2.32 respectively, out of 5.

Table 2: Aspects of life improved during the project

	Mean for microgrants	Mean for capacity building	Mean for community leadership	Average
Improve feeding	4.14	5.00	4.00	4.38
Improve housing	3.97	4.01	4.00	3.99
Improve clothing	3.94	4.00	4.00	3.98
Improve health	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
Business	3.83	0.13	3.01	2.32
Vehicle	2.91	0.03	2.91	1.95
Assets: land and house	3.15	3.95	3.12	3.41
Financial support	5.00	5.00	4.14	4.71
Government programs	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
Social integration	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
Average	4.19	3.71	4.02	3.97

Impact of community empowerment services on poverty reduction

The respondents were asked about the level of poverty before and after the project in general, and the relative poverty to different aspects of

life, and their answers were summarized in table 2.

In general, all services provided contributed significantly to the poverty reduction: microgrants, capacity building services, community leadership services. In addition, the overall impact of the project on poverty

reduction was significantly positive, because there is a significant difference between the level of the poverty before and after the project (p value <0.05).

Table 3: Comparison of poverty level before and after the project

	Paired Differences					t	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% CI			
				Lower	Upper		
Poverty before grants- Poverty after grants	2.927	0.548	0.028	2.871	2.983	102.923	0.000
Poverty before capacity building- Poverty after capacity building	2.908	0.496	0.026	2.858	2.959	113.029	0.000
Poverty before community leadership- Poverty after community leadership	3.011	0.735	0.038	2.936	3.086	78.886	0.000
Poverty before the project - Poverty after the project	2.057	0.812	0.042	1.974	2.139	48.799	0.000

### Local leaders and poverty reduction

According to the local leaders, the poverty level is declining in Rulindo District, especially in the sectors of intervention. “Ubudehe” and “Girinka” programs are some of the programs that allow citizens to access jobs, which help them to afford the health insurance and other basic needs. “The problem of poverty as the way people are not able to get the basic necessities of their daily life, here I am going to talk about the fact that they have no livestock to feed and use it to buy food, medicine...”, reported one local leader.

The role of local leaders in poverty reduction is crucial, as they encourage citizens to adopt more poverty reducing behaviours: “... we encouraged them to buy land, livestock... It is obvious because even if the pig gave birth to 6-8 calves (piglets) when he sold it he could buy land and have savings in SACCO or in other saving groups” reported another local leader.

“Once the community understands the importance of development and co-operation, his appurtenance in saving groups and implementing projects of their choice this shows the sustainability, like

an example, if he/she receives an animal given to him by the government or another partner and benefits from it, he

## Conclusion

In general, project implemented by Spark MicroGrant in Rulindo District, specifically in Rukozo and Cyungo sectors has helped in poverty reduction as attested by respondents. There was a high improvement of some aspects of life such as health, participation to government programs and social integration. However, there is a long way to go on other aspects such as business improvement and acquisition of vehicles. Furthermore, the local leaders play an

will definitely take care of it and strive to increase its number” claimed another local leader.

important role in helping citizens to upgrade from poverty by working hand in hand with other local, international organizations. They serve as a bridge between the population and the central government, and they help the population to achieve the targets of the government. People should be encouraged to save and invest in income generating activities. In addition, research should explore the involvement of gender in poverty reduction and income generating activities.

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