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Social Equity and Community Engagement in Urban Development Planning: Prospects and Challenges in Mbale City, Uganda

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ABSTRACT: This study examined how social equity is integrated into community engagement processes in urban development planning in Mbale City, Uganda. The study was motivated by persistent concerns that conventional planning processes may privilege more powerful stakeholders while marginalising low-income residents, persons with disabilities, informal-settlement residents, and other groups whose daily lives are most affected by urban change. Using a mixed-methods design, the study drew on survey responses and qualitative insights from community members, city council officials, local government actors, planners, and key informants. A total sample of 232 participants was used, comprising an estimated survey sample derived from Yamane's finite-population formula and additional purposively selected key informants. The findings show that community engagement in Mbale relies mainly on conventional face-to-face mechanisms, especially public meetings, focus group discussions, and surveys. Although respondents associated urban planning with visible improvements in business centres, health-care distribution, settlement areas, roads, and infrastructure, the findings also reveal persistent barriers to equitable engagement, including corruption, political interference, rapid population growth, insufficient funding, poor implementation, land-tenure challenges, unplanned settlements, and limited citizen awareness. The study concludes that infrastructure-oriented urban development does not automatically produce social equity unless participation is deliberately inclusive, transparent, adequately funded, and linked to measurable equity outcomes. The article recommends institutionalising inclusive engagement procedures, strengthening community feedback loops, expanding accessible digital and spatial tools, and embedding equity monitoring into urban planning practice.

INTRODUCTION

Rapid urbanisation has intensified pressure on local governments to provide housing, transport, sanitation, health-related infrastructure, public space, and livelihood opportunities. However, urban development remains uneven when planning decisions are shaped primarily by economic growth, elite interests, or technocratic assumptions rather than by the lived experiences of residents. International policy frameworks, including Sustainable Development Goal 11, emphasise that cities should be inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable, while UN-Habitat argues that the future of cities depends on policies that confront poverty, inequality, and exclusion rather than merely expanding physical infrastructure (United Nations, n.d.; UN-Habitat, 2022).

Community engagement is therefore not a procedural formality; it is a governance mechanism through which residents can shape decisions about land use, infrastructure priorities, resource allocation, and neighbourhood change. Yet participation can range from superficial consultation to genuine citizen power. Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation remains useful because it shows that public meetings and consultation exercises do not necessarily transfer decision-making influence to communities. Fainstein's

(2010) just-city framework similarly suggests that urban development should be assessed by its contribution to equity, democracy, and diversity, not only by economic or physical outputs.

The concern addressed in this study is that urban planning processes may reproduce social inequalities when marginalised groups are invited to participate but lack the information, confidence, time, language access, mobility, digital access, or institutional trust needed to influence final decisions. Recent studies show that community engagement can improve planning outcomes when it is sustained, locally grounded, and responsive to community knowledge (Deep, 2023; Gearin & Hurt, 2024; Owuondo, 2024). Other studies also caution that barriers such as limited resources, expert-dominated procedures, institutional mistrust, and power imbalances can weaken participation (Geekiyanage et al., 2023).

In Mbale City, these issues are particularly relevant because urban development pressures intersect with rapid population growth, land-use change, service-delivery demands, and local governance challenges. The study therefore examines the prospects and challenges of integrating social equity into community engagement in urban development planning. The central argument is that inclusive engagement must be treated as a substantive equity practice rather than as an administrative requirement. Planning becomes socially equitable when historically under-represented residents are not only informed about development proposals but are also able to shape priorities, contest decisions, and monitor implementation. Bolatito (2024) contends that innovative social policy is crucial for establishing societies by addressing inequalities, promoting social justice, and enhancing individuals' welfare. A crucial aspect of transformative social policy is the establishment of social security, protection, and public services. Social security initiatives aim to offer financial assistance to individuals during periods of necessity, such as unemployment, disability, or old age. Protection policies emphasise safeguarding at-risk populations by alleviating threats and vulnerabilities, including maltreatment, bias, and exploitation. The government provides a wide range of essential public services to enhance the welfare and advancement of society collectively.

Objectives of the Study

- To investigate the methods used to engage communities in urban development planning in Mbale City.
- To determine the perceived contribution of urban development planning to social equity and community wellbeing in Mbale City.
- To identify the challenges encountered in achieving equitable community engagement in urban development planning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social equity in urban planning refers to the fair distribution of urban resources, opportunities, risks, and decision-making power. It extends beyond formal equality by recognising that different groups require different forms of support to participate meaningfully and benefit from development. In planning scholarship, equity is closely linked to justice: who receives public investment, who bears displacement or environmental burdens, who has access to services, and whose knowledge counts in decision-making. Fainstein (2010) argues that a just city must foreground equity and democratic participation, especially where market-led development produces uneven benefits.

Community engagement is widely promoted as a strategy for improving urban decisions, but the quality of engagement matters. Gearin and Hurt (2024) show that locally embedded engagement can build trust and generate knowledge that informs land-use planning. Owuondo (2024) similarly identifies community engagement as a catalyst for sustainable and inclusive urban planning. However, consultation processes that only collect views without redistributing influence risk becoming tokenistic. This concern is consistent with Arnstein's (1969) distinction between participation as symbolic involvement and participation as actual citizen power.

Furthermore, although there exists a substantial body of work regarding informal settlements and urban poverty in African cities, studies examining the dynamics of informal urbanisation in Mogadishu and its effects on local governance are scarce. The swift expansion of informal settlements is observable throughout the Benadir region as a result of population influx and inadequate housing policies. The documentation regarding the regulatory frameworks for incorporating these informal areas into the official urban plan is inadequate (M. M. a. a. H. M. a. S. Bolatito, 2025).

Recent literature also identifies barriers that limit community inclusion. Geekiyanage et al. (2023), in their study of risk-sensitive urban planning, show that factors impeding participation are interconnected and include institutional, technical, social, and communication-related constraints. In practical planning contexts, residents may fail to participate because meetings are held at inconvenient times, information is too technical, local languages are not used adequately, transport costs are high, or people doubt that public input will influence decisions. These barriers are not neutral; they usually affect poor households, women, persons with disabilities, older persons, informal workers, and residents in underserved neighbourhoods more severely.

Digital tools and spatial technologies offer both opportunities and risks. Online platforms, geographic information systems, digital mapping, and virtual engagement tools can expand participation and make spatial inequities more visible. For example, research on green-space accessibility demonstrates that GIS-based and spatial approaches can reveal inequities that conventional consultations may overlook (Huang et al., 2023). At the same time, digital participation can exclude groups without reliable internet access, digital literacy, or trust in data systems. Allam et al. (2022) note that virtual forms of smart-city development raise environmental,

economic, and social sustainability questions, including the risk that technological innovation may reproduce inequalities if equity safeguards are weak.

Equity-oriented planning is also connected to public health and wellbeing. Urban form influences access to health services, walkability, green space, road safety, air quality, social interaction, and exposure to environmental risks. It would progressively enhance citizens' social and moral entitlements to fundamental services and a baseline quality of life, exacerbate social inequality, and result in the denial of justice, culminating in a catastrophic socio-structural outcome. Similarly, incapacity to address social and economic issues (Aina-Obe, 2022).

Nieuwenhuijsen et al. (2024), for example, review the Superblock model and present it as an urban intervention with implications for sustainability, liveability, health, and wellbeing. Similarly, Calderón-Argelich et al. (2023) argue that inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches to urban greenspace planning require attention to diverse needs, safety, autonomy, accessibility, and municipal capacity. These studies support the view that social equity should be embedded in urban planning rather than added after infrastructure priorities have already been determined.

The literature therefore suggests three principles for equitable urban development planning. First, engagement should be representative and intentionally inclusive, particularly for groups historically excluded from planning forums. Second, engagement should be influential, meaning that community input must be traceable in final plans, budgets, and implementation decisions. Third, equity should be measurable, using indicators such as access to services, distribution of investments, participation rates across demographic groups, and public trust in planning institutions. This study applies these principles to examine community engagement and social equity in Mbale City.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design to capture both measurable patterns of community engagement and qualitative insights into the experiences of stakeholders. The quantitative component enabled the study to summarise the frequency of engagement methods, perceived planning contributions, and major challenges. The qualitative component, based on interviews and focus group discussions, helped interpret why particular engagement mechanisms were more visible than others and why some residents may remain underrepresented in planning processes.

The study was conducted in Mbale City, Uganda. The target population comprised city council management staff, local government council management staff, and members of the local community. These groups were selected because they represent both the institutional actors responsible for planning and the residents affected by urban development decisions.

The target population was 500. The initial sample estimate was calculated using Yamane's simplified finite-population formula, $n = N/[1 + N(e^2)]$, where n is the sample size, N is the population, and e is the level of precision. Using N = 500 and e = .05, the estimated sample was approximately 222 respondents (Yamane, 1967). To strengthen qualitative depth, 10 additional key informants were purposively selected for face-to-face interviews, including senior planning and administrative officials. The total sample used in the study was therefore 232 participants.

Table 1: Target Population and Sample Size

Category	Target population	Sample
Mbale City Council management team	50	25
Local government council management team	50	25
Local community	400	182
Total	500	232

Note. The total sample includes the survey estimate and additional purposively selected key informants.

Data were collected using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. Questionnaires generated descriptive statistics on engagement methods, perceived contributions, and challenges. Semi-structured interviews enabled key informants to explain institutional processes, resource constraints, political dynamics, and implementation issues. Focus group discussions captured community-level experiences and perceptions of participation.

Quantitative data were analysed using frequencies and percentages. Qualitative data were analysed thematically, with attention to recurring issues such as representation, institutional trust, political interference, resource limitations, and accessibility of engagement platforms. The mixed-methods approach strengthened the study by allowing numerical findings to be interpreted alongside stakeholder narratives. However, the study remains limited by its cross-sectional design, which captures perceptions at one point in time and does not measure long-term equity outcomes after planning decisions are implemented.

Ethical attention should be maintained in future reporting by documenting informed consent procedures, confidentiality protections, voluntary participation, and the handling of sensitive governance-related responses. These details are important because studies

involving political interference, corruption, and public trust can expose participants to reputational or institutional risks if confidentiality is not assured.

RESULTS

Methods Used to Engage Communities

The findings show that Mbale City authorities used multiple mechanisms to engage residents in urban development planning. However, the engagement pattern was dominated by conventional face-to-face approaches.

Table 2: Methods Used to Engage Local Communities in Urban Development Planning

Method	Frequency	Percentage
Public meetings	46	20
Surveys and questionnaires	35	16
Focus group discussions	45	19
Workshops	27	12
Geospatial tools	10	4
Online engagement platforms	24	10
Citizen deliberative panels	15	6
Community awareness campaigns	18	8
Events such as cultural ceremonies	12	5
Total	232	100

Public meetings were the most common mechanism, accounting for 20% of responses, followed by focus group discussions at 19% and surveys or questionnaires at 16%. Workshops accounted for 12%, while online engagement platforms represented 10%. Less frequently used mechanisms included community awareness campaigns, citizen deliberative panels, cultural ceremonies or events, and geospatial tools. The low use of geospatial tools is important because participatory mapping and spatial data can help communities visualise service gaps, land-use conflicts, and environmental risks. Overall, the results indicate that Mbale City uses a multi-method engagement approach, but participation remains anchored in traditional consultation formats.

Perceived Contribution of Urban Development Planning

Respondents identified several ways in which urban development planning has contributed to community wellbeing and social equity. Because the original draft contained conflicting narrative interpretations of this figure, the revised analysis uses only the frequencies provided in the dataset and recalculates percentages from the total sample of 232.

Table 3: Perceived Contribution of Urban Development Planning in Mbale City

Contribution	Frequency	Percentage
Infrastructure development	26	11.2
Improved health-care centre distribution	38	16.4
Natural disaster control	10	4.3
Well-developed business centres	39	16.8
Improved city security	16	6.9
Improved investment prospects	25	10.8
Improved settlement areas	35	15.1
Improved road network	28	12.1
Improved environmental status	15	6.5
Total	232	100.0

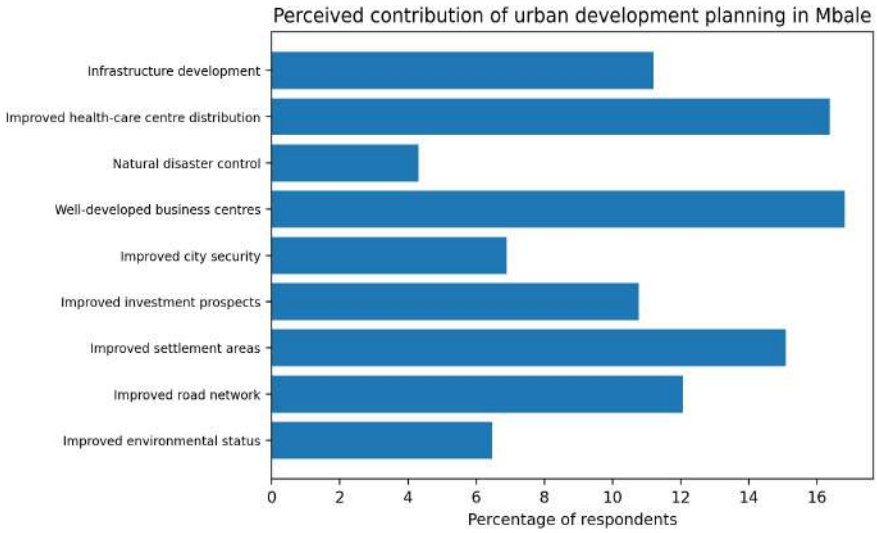

Figure 1. Perceived contribution of urban development planning in Mbale City.

The most frequently reported contribution was the development of business centres, identified by 16.8% of respondents, followed by improved health-care centre distribution at 16.4% and improved settlement areas at 15.1%. Improved road networks accounted for 12.1%, infrastructure development for 11.2%, and improved investment prospects for 10.8%. Lower reported contributions included improved city security, improved environmental status, and natural disaster control. These findings suggest that respondents mainly perceive the benefits of urban development through tangible infrastructure and service-access outcomes. However, the findings do not by themselves prove that planning has achieved structural equity. Rather, they show that physical development is visible, while deeper equity outcomes such as fair resource distribution, protection of marginalised groups, and institutional transparency require more direct measurement.

Challenges to Equitable Community Engagement

Table 4: Challenges Encountered in Achieving Community Engagement in Urban Development Planning

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage
Insufficient funding	32	14
Rapid population growth	35	15
Poor implementation of planned activities	28	12
Land tenure and ownership problems	19	8
Political interference	37	16
Unplanned settlements	20	9
Corruption problems	45	19
Unawareness among citizens	16	7
Total	232	100

The most frequently reported challenge was corruption, cited by 19% of respondents, followed by political interference at 16% and rapid population growth at 15%. Insufficient funding accounted for 14%, poor implementation of planned activities for 12%, unplanned settlements for 9%, land tenure and ownership problems for 8%, and limited citizen awareness for 7%. Governance-related constraints are particularly significant: corruption and political interference together account for 35% of the reported challenges. This pattern suggests that the effectiveness of community engagement depends not only on participation methods but also on institutional credibility, accountability, and implementation capacity.

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that community engagement is present in Mbale City's urban development planning, but the form of engagement remains heavily conventional. Public meetings, focus group discussions, and surveys are useful because they are familiar, relatively low-cost, and accessible to many residents. Nevertheless, their effectiveness depends on who attends, who speaks, how information is presented, and whether community input changes decisions. Arnstein's (1969) participation framework is useful here: public meetings may represent consultation, but consultation alone is not equivalent to citizen power. When participation does not influence budgets, land-use priorities, or implementation, it can deepen mistrust rather than strengthen democratic planning.

The study also shows that residents associate urban development mainly with visible physical improvements. Business centres, health-care distribution, settlements, roads, and infrastructure were the most visible contributions. This pattern is understandable because infrastructure is easier for residents to observe than procedural equity. However, social equity requires more than physical projects. A new road, market, or health facility becomes equitable only when its location, affordability, safety, accessibility, and distribution respond to the needs of disadvantaged groups. This point aligns with research on spatial accessibility, which shows that urban amenities must be evaluated by who can reach and use them, not only by whether they exist (Huang et al., 2023).

The challenges identified by respondents highlight the governance dimension of social equity. Corruption and political interference were the leading barriers, suggesting that residents may perceive planning as vulnerable to elite capture or partisan priorities. This finding is consistent with the broader literature showing that community engagement is weakened when institutional processes are not transparent and when stakeholders believe decisions have already been made before consultation occurs (Geekiyanage et al., 2023; Owuondo, 2024). Therefore, improving participation requires more than inviting residents to meetings; it requires transparent decision rules, accessible records of community feedback, and public reporting on how engagement shaped final plans.

The low reported use of geospatial tools also deserves attention. Participatory mapping, GIS, and community-based spatial audits can help planners identify areas underserved by roads, drainage, health centres, schools, markets, waste services, public lighting, and green space. These tools can strengthen equity by making spatial disparities visible. However, technology must be used carefully. Digital tools can widen exclusion if they depend on internet access, smartphones, technical literacy, or languages not widely used by residents. Allam et al. (2022) caution that smart-city and virtual planning innovations should be evaluated through social sustainability lenses. In Mbale, digital tools should therefore complement, not replace, face-to-face and locally accessible engagement.

The findings also support a stronger connection between urban planning and public health. Respondents identified health-care distribution, settlement improvement, environmental status, road networks, and disaster control as planning contributions. These areas directly affect wellbeing through access to services, mobility, safety, environmental quality, and resilience. Research on health-oriented urban models shows that urban form can function as a public-health intervention when it improves liveability, environmental quality, and access to everyday needs (Nieuwenhuijsen et al., 2024). For Mbale, this means that equity indicators should include health-related measures such as distance to health facilities, drainage adequacy, road safety, air quality, public lighting, and access for persons with disabilities.

Overall, the study demonstrates that equitable urban development planning requires an integrated governance approach. Community engagement should be designed to reach marginalised residents, translate planning information into understandable formats, provide safe spaces for dissent, incorporate community feedback into budgets and plans, and monitor whether benefits reach underserved neighbourhoods. Without these mechanisms, urban development may improve the physical appearance of the city while leaving underlying inequalities intact.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the prospects and challenges of integrating social equity into community engagement in urban development planning in Mbale City. The findings show that Mbale uses several engagement mechanisms, especially public meetings, focus group discussions, surveys, and workshops. These mechanisms create opportunities for residents to participate, but they remain insufficient if they do not produce inclusive representation, transparent decision-making, and measurable equity outcomes. The results further show that residents perceive urban planning benefits mainly through visible physical improvements such as business centres, health-care distribution, settlement improvement, roads, and infrastructure. However, equitable planning requires a deeper focus on fair resource allocation, accessibility for vulnerable groups, institutional accountability, and sustained community influence over planning decisions.

The major challenges are governance-related and structural. Corruption, political interference, population growth, funding constraints, poor implementation, unplanned settlements, land tenure issues, and limited citizen awareness all weaken meaningful participation. The study therefore concludes that social equity cannot be achieved through infrastructure expansion alone. It requires deliberate institutional design, inclusive engagement methods, anti-corruption safeguards, and planning indicators that track who participates, who benefits, and whose needs remain unmet.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Institutionalise an inclusive community-engagement framework that specifically identifies marginalised groups, including persons with disabilities, low-income residents, women, youth, older persons, informal-settlement residents, and other underserved communities.
- Diversify engagement methods by combining public meetings with smaller neighborhood dialogues, citizen deliberative panels, participatory mapping, translated planning briefs, radio announcements, and accessible digital feedback channels.
- Create a transparent feedback loop showing how community submissions influence urban plans, budgets, project locations, and implementation schedules.

- Allocate a dedicated budget for community engagement so that participation is not treated as an optional activity dependent on irregular funding.
- Use equity indicators to monitor access to roads, health centres, markets, drainage, waste services, public lighting, green space, and other public infrastructure across neighborhoods.
- Strengthen governance safeguards by publishing planning criteria, procurement updates, implementation progress, and community-monitoring reports to reduce corruption and political interference.
- Improve citizen awareness through continuous civic education on planning rights, land-use procedures, project timelines, and mechanisms for lodging complaints or appeals.
- Conduct longitudinal research to assess whether community engagement produces long-term improvements in equity, trust, service access, and community wellbeing.

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