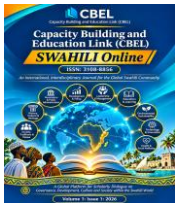
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Community Decision-Making and the Sustainability of Rural Water Projects in Tunduru District Council, Tanzania



Community Decision-Making and the Sustainability of Rural Water Projects in Tunduru District Council, Tanzania

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Abstract

Purpose: This study assessed the role of community decision-making in the sustainability of rural water projects in Tunduru District Council, Ruvuma Region, Tanzania, where many water points become non-functional within a few years of installation.

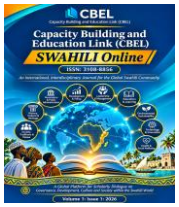
Design/methodology/approach: A mixed-methods cross-sectional design guided by Participatory Development Theory and Empowerment Theory was adopted. Questionnaires were completed by 336 community members (96.0% response) in Bugujali, Rahaleo, Masuguru and Ligunga wards, and key informants, including village leaders, Water User Committee members, district water officials and NGO representatives, were interviewed. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, regression and thematic analysis.

Findings: Community decision-making was perceived positively across all six indicators (item means 3.78–4.02). The belief that community decisions positively affect sustainability was strongest (M = 4.02; 82.4% agreement), followed by the effectiveness of community meetings (M = 3.97). Transparency in decision-making was the weakest indicator (M = 3.78). Decision-making was strongly correlated with perceived sustainability ($r = 0.883$, $p < 0.001$) and explained 78.0% of its variance. Interviews revealed that women's voices were often sidelined and that communities sometimes felt that decisions were made far away from them.

Research limitations/implications: Sustainability was measured through community perceptions in four wards of one district, and the cross-sectional design does not establish causation.

Practical implications: District councils and implementing partners should institutionalise transparent, inclusive decision-making, including gender-sensitive meeting arrangements and clear feedback on technical and budgetary decisions.

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INTRODUCTION

Access to safe and reliable water is central to health, livelihoods and human development, and Sustainable Development Goal 6 commits governments to universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water by 2030. Yet across sub-Saharan Africa, a large share of rural water points stop functioning within a few years of construction because of weak management, inadequate finance and limited local capacity (Walters et al., 2020). Community participation has therefore become a central principle of rural water policy, on the premise that communities which take part in planning and managing water systems will develop the ownership, accountability and commitment needed to sustain them (Pretty, 2019; Davis & McGregor, 2020).

Of the different dimensions of participation, decision-making is arguably the most consequential. Participation that is limited to contributing labour or attending meetings may leave communities without real influence over the choice of technology, the location of water points, tariff setting or maintenance arrangements. International evidence shows that where communities and their representatives shape such decisions, water systems are more likely to remain functional (Megdal et al., 2017; Khan et al., 2024). In East Africa, Odhiambo and Lango (2024) reported a significant positive relationship between community decision-making and the sustainability of water projects in Kenya.

In Tanzania, the National Water Sector Development Strategy and the Water Resources Management Act emphasise community participation as a cornerstone of ownership, accountability and sustainability. Despite these commitments and substantial investment, empirical evidence indicates that approximately 40–60% of rural water points in Tanzania become non-functional within a few years of installation. In Tunduru District, only about 48% of households have access to improved water sources, while over half still rely on unsafe or unreliable sources (Mhando & Mhina, 2022; Chimwaga et al., 2022). Community participation remains inadequately implemented in practice: participation is often limited to unskilled labour, and communities have limited influence over how water projects are designed, where they are located and how they are managed.

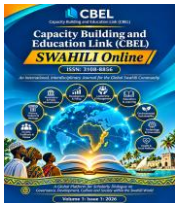
Although Tanzanian studies have examined community participation in water projects (Chumbula & Massawe, 2018; Magungu, 2024; Simon & Moturi, 2025), few have examined the decision-making dimension in detail within a predominantly rural district facing persistent water scarcity. This article reports the first objective of a broader study on the effectiveness of community participation on the sustainability of water projects in rural Tanzania: to assess the role of community decision-making in sustainable water projects in Tunduru District Council.

Theoretical Framework

Participatory Development Theory

Participatory Development Theory propounded by Chambers in (1997), emphasised the active involvement of communities in planning, decision-making, and implementing development projects to ensure sustainability and ownership. According to Chambers (1997), participatory approaches empower local communities by recognising their knowledge, needs, and priorities, leading to more effective and sustainable development outcomes. This theory aligns with rural water projects as it highlights that community engagement directly influences project success and long-term maintenance. By involving beneficiaries in every stage, projects are more likely to reflect local realities and gain community support.

At its core, Participatory Development Theory posits that genuine community involvement in decision-making processes not only enhances the relevance and effectiveness of development projects but also fosters a sense of ownership among community members, thus empowering them to take an active role in defining their own progress and well-being. By prioritising local knowledge and experiences, this theory recognises that



individuals within these communities possess valuable insights that can inform and enrich the development process, enabling practitioners and policymakers to design interventions that are more closely aligned with the unique cultural, social, and economic contexts in which they operate.

In this study, Participatory Development Theory implies that communities which take part in decisions about the location, design and management of water points will be more committed to protecting and maintaining them. The theory has been criticised for assuming that participation is always genuine and for underestimating the influence of local elites and power inequalities, which may allow some voices to dominate decision-making forums (Cornwall, 2017).

Empowerment Theory

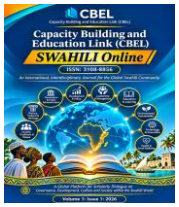
Empowerment Theory focuses on increasing the capacity, confidence and control of individuals and communities over the decisions and resources that affect their lives (Zimmerman, 2000). It emphasises processes that enable people to gain skills, access resources and participate meaningfully in decision-making. In the context of rural water projects, the theory explains why meaningful decision-making, as distinct from symbolic consultation, can strengthen communities' ability to manage and sustain water systems. Together, the two theories suggest that decision-making contributes to sustainability when it is inclusive, transparent and backed by feedback, so that communities genuinely influence outcomes.

Empirical Literature

Odhiambo and Lango (2024) examined decision-making and the sustainability of World Vision community water projects in Homa Bay County, Kenya, using a descriptive design involving project managers, committee members and local leaders. They found a statistically significant positive relationship between community decision-making and project sustainability, with greater community involvement in planning, management and oversight associated with stronger sustainability outcomes.

In Tanzania, Magungu (2024) used an explanatory quantitative design with 300 respondents in Ngara District and found that communities which actively participated in setting operational rules, contributing user fees and supervising maintenance were more likely to sustain water infrastructure. Khan et al. (2024) reported similar findings in Karak District, Pakistan, where strong community involvement across planning, implementation and monitoring built trust between stakeholders, increased user satisfaction and improved the long-term viability of rural water supply schemes. In a review of participatory water governance in East and Central Africa, Lema (2025) concluded that community-driven decision-making frameworks, such as water user associations and management committees, enhance sustainability by enabling local users to coordinate maintenance, regulate water use and solve operational problems collectively.

Beyond the water sector, participation in decision-making has been linked to the relevance and acceptability of public policies and to greater transparency and accountability in governance (Hossain et al., 2021; Bourke et al., 2020). Rijal (2023) emphasised that community involvement in public management planning and decision-making improves the fit between public interventions and local needs. In water governance specifically, Pahl-Wostl et al. (2021) argued that governance models capable of meeting the Sustainable Development Goals must integrate local stakeholders into decision-making across scales, while Nastar et al. (2018) cautioned that participatory water governance can fall short of its emancipatory promise where existing inequalities shape who participates. In Ethiopia, Asbetsadik et al. (2025) found that community participation was important for the sustainability of rural water supply schemes but faced persistent challenges, and Madon et al. (2018) showed in Tanzania that community participation in health governance depends on how local structures are organised and supported.



Other studies highlight the conditions under which decision-making is meaningful. Megdal et al. (2017) emphasised that stakeholder engagement in water governance must be structured and continuous to support sustainability, while Owusu et al. (2020) documented dilemmas in citizen participation in water governance where formal structures did not translate into real influence. Contzen et al. (2021) showed that psychological ownership is an important mechanism linking participation to safe water management. Taken together, the literature indicates that community decision-making supports sustainability, but that its effect depends on transparency, inclusiveness and the presence of feedback mechanisms. Evidence from rural southern Tanzania remains limited, which this study addresses.

METHOD

Research Approach and Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach because the research questions required both numerical evidence and detailed explanations of how community participation influences the sustainability of water projects (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Quantitative data measured the level of participation and perceived sustainability, while qualitative information provided insights into community experiences and challenges. A cross-sectional survey design with explanatory components was used: it described the current state of decision-making and sustainability at a single point in time and examined the relationships between them.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Tunduru District Council, one of the eight districts of Ruvuma Region in southern Tanzania, which borders Mozambique to the south. In 2022, the district had a population of 412,054. Tunduru was selected because it is a predominantly rural and agrarian district facing persistent challenges in accessing clean and sustainable water, and because it has active community-driven initiatives, including boreholes, rainwater harvesting and community training, that provide a practical setting for examining decision-making and sustainability. Four wards, Bugujali, Rahaleo, Masuguru and Ligunga, were selected.

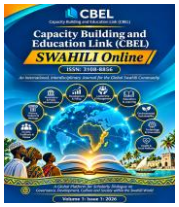
Population, Sample and Sampling

The target population comprised about 55,000 household members in the four wards, 120 village leaders, 300 Water User Committee members, 25 district water officials and 24 representatives of NGOs and development partners, giving a total of 57,669. Using Slovin's formula with a 5% margin of error, a sample of 398 was determined and distributed as shown in Table 1. Household members were selected by simple random sampling from household lists obtained from Village Executive Officers, Water User Committee members by stratified sampling, and village leaders, district water officials and NGO representatives by purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in water project planning or management.

Table 1. Target population, sample size and sampling techniques

Categories of Respondents	Target Population (N)	Sample Size (n)	Sampling Techniques
Household Members (Community)	55,000	300	Simple Random Sampling
Village Leaders (Chairpersons, VEOs)	120	30	Purposive Sampling
Water User Committee Members	300	50	Stratified Sampling
District Water Engineers/Officials	25	10	Purposive Sampling
NGO/Development Partners	24	8	Purposive Sampling
Total	57,669	398	—

Source: Field data (2026).



Data Collection

A structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from community members (Saunders et al., 2019). Community decision-making was measured using six statements on the effectiveness of community meetings, representation of community interests by local leaders, participation in project-planning discussions, the influence of community decisions on sustainability, transparency in decision-making and the availability of feedback mechanisms, rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). In-depth interviews were conducted with village leaders, Water User Committee members, district water officials and NGO representatives, and government reports, policy documents and previous studies were reviewed.

Validity and Reliability

Content validity was assessed by experts, including the research supervisors and a public administration scholar with knowledge of water governance, who reviewed the questionnaire for coverage, clarity and relevance. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha for each multi-item scale on the basis of pilot data, with 0.70 regarded as acceptable and 0.80 or higher as good; items in scales below the threshold were reviewed and revised.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were coded and entered into SPSS version 27.0 and analysed using frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. Composite scores for decision-making and perceived sustainability were computed, and Pearson correlation and linear regression were used to examine their relationship. Qualitative data from interviews and documents were transcribed, coded and analysed thematically, and the results were used to explain the quantitative patterns.

Ethical Considerations

Research clearance was obtained from Kampala International University in Tanzania, and permission was granted by Tunduru District Council. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave informed consent; participation was voluntary, confidentiality was maintained by using codes rather than names, and data were reported in aggregate form.

RESULTS

Response Rate and Respondents

Of the 350 questionnaires distributed to community members in the four wards, 336 were returned fully completed and valid, giving a response rate of 96.0%. Respondents covered all adult age groups: 27.4% were aged 25–34 years, 25.9% were aged 35–44 years and 20.2% were aged 45–54 years, while 13.4% were aged 18–24 and 13.1% were aged 55 or over.

Role of Community Decision-Making in Sustainable Water Projects

The first objective sought to assess the role of community decision-making in sustainable water projects in Tunduru District Council. The questionnaire measured this objective using six statements concerning the effectiveness of community meetings, representation by local leaders, participation in project-planning discussions, the influence of community decisions on sustainability, transparency in decision-making and the availability of feedback mechanisms. These indicators are consistent with the conceptual framework, which identifies participation, consensus building and community involvement in decision-making as important dimensions of community participation.

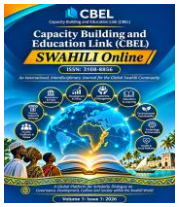


Table 2. Respondents' views on the role of community decision-making in sustainable water projects (n = 336)

Statement	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Mean	Std. Dev.
Community meetings effectively facilitate decision-making about water projects	12 (3.6%)	25 (7.4%)	31 (9.2%)	162 (48.2%)	106 (31.5%)	3.968	1.012
Local leaders represent community interests in decision-making processes for water projects	15 (4.5%)	28 (8.3%)	29 (8.6%)	158 (47.0%)	106 (31.5%)	3.929	1.068
Community members actively participate in discussions related to water project planning	18 (5.4%)	32 (9.5%)	35 (10.4%)	155 (46.1%)	96 (28.6%)	3.830	1.112
Decisions made by community members positively impact the sustainability of water projects	10 (3.0%)	22 (6.5%)	27 (8.0%)	168 (50.0%)	109 (32.4%)	4.024	0.978
There is transparency in how decisions are made regarding community water projects	20 (6.0%)	35 (10.4%)	38 (11.3%)	148 (44.0%)	95 (28.3%)	3.783	1.145
Regular feedback mechanisms are in place to guide community decision-making	16 (4.8%)	30 (8.9%)	33 (9.8%)	160 (47.6%)	97 (28.9%)	3.869	1.079

Source: Field data (2026).

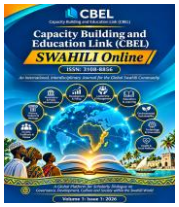
As Table 2 shows, all six indicators recorded means in the high range (3.41–4.20), and the average of the six item means was 3.90. The belief that decisions made by community members positively affect the sustainability of water projects recorded the highest mean (M = 4.02, SD = 0.98), with 82.4% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing. When residents influence site selection, technology choice and management rules, they are more likely to protect and repair water infrastructure over time. This item also had the lowest standard deviation, which indicates broad consensus.

The effectiveness of community meetings in facilitating decision-making recorded the second-highest mean (M = 3.97, SD = 1.01), with 79.7% agreement, indicating that formal gatherings are recognised as platforms for collective deliberation and the exchange of local knowledge. Representation of community interests by local leaders also scored highly (M = 3.93; 78.5% agreement), reflecting a prevailing belief that village chairpersons and executive officers generally articulate household concerns to external implementers.

Active participation in discussions related to water project planning recorded a lower mean (M = 3.83; 74.7% agreement), which suggests that attendance at meetings does not always translate into active engagement in planning. Feedback mechanisms were recognised as present by most respondents (M = 3.87; 76.5% agreement), although they did not appear to be fully institutionalised. Transparency in how decisions are made recorded the lowest mean (M = 3.78) and the highest standard deviation (SD = 1.15), with 16.4% of respondents disagreeing. Transparency was therefore the weakest dimension of community decision-making, and experiences of openness varied considerably among households.

Relationship between Decision-Making and Perceived Sustainability

Pearson correlation analysis showed a strong, positive and statistically significant relationship between community decision-making and perceived sustainability of water projects ($r = 0.883$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 336$). In a simple linear regression, decision-making alone explained 78.0% of the variance in perceived sustainability ($R^2 = 0.780$; $B = 1.377$, $p < 0.001$). When decision-making was entered together with the combined information-



sharing and resource-contribution composite, it retained a unique and significant positive effect (B = 0.243, p = 0.001), although the combined composite made the larger contribution. The results are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Simple linear regression results predicting perceived sustainability

Predictor	Intercept (SE)	Unstandardised β (SE)	t	p	R^2	Adj. R^2	F	Model p
Community Decision-Making (DM)	–1.306 (0.158)	1.377 (0.040)	34.46	< 0.001	0.780	0.780	1187.2	< 0.001
Information Sharing & Resource Contribution (ISRC)	0.571 (0.071)	0.888 (0.018)	50.57	< 0.001	0.884	0.884	2557.0	< 0.001

Note. DM = community decision-making; ISRC = information sharing and resource contribution. Source: Field data (2026).

Qualitative Findings

Interviews provided important qualifications to the positive survey results. A Water User Committee member explained that meeting arrangements limited women's influence: "Meetings are usually held in the afternoon when women are still fetching water or preparing food. Even when we attend, men dominate the discussion and our suggestions about location of water points or fee collection times are rarely taken seriously" (KI-03). Although women bear the heaviest burden of water collection, their practical knowledge of preferred sites, collection times and household affordability was often sidelined.

Institutional and communication gaps also weakened community influence over decisions: "There is often a gap between what the community wants and what the approved design allows. Sometimes funds arrive late or are reduced, and we cannot always explain the reasons clearly to the villages. People then feel decisions are made far away without them" (KI-04). Another informant noted that fear of powerful individuals discouraged open discussion: "Others fear that if they speak against powerful individuals in the village they will be sidelined" (KI-06). These accounts help to explain why transparency was the weakest decision-making indicator.

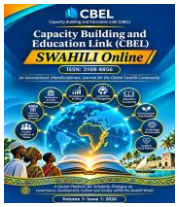
DISCUSSION

Decision-Making as a Foundation of Sustainability

The findings show that community members in Tunduru regard their involvement in decision-making as an important foundation for the sustainability of water projects. The high ratings for the influence of community decisions on sustainability and for the effectiveness of meetings, together with the strong correlation between decision-making and perceived sustainability, support the central proposition of Participatory Development Theory that genuine involvement in decisions fosters ownership and commitment (Chambers, 1997). The results are consistent with Odhiambo and Lango (2024), who found a significant positive relationship between decision-making and the sustainability of community water projects in Kenya, and with Magungu (2024), who showed that communities that set operational rules and supervise maintenance in Ngara District are more likely to sustain their water systems.

Transparency, Inclusion and the Depth of Participation

The comparatively weaker results for transparency and for active participation in planning discussions, together with the interview evidence, indicate that participation in decision-making is not equally deep for all community members. Meetings exist and leaders are generally seen as representative, but the reasoning behind technical and budgetary decisions is not always communicated, women's contributions are often marginalised and local power dynamics may silence dissent. From the perspective of Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman, 2000), these conditions limit the extent to which participation builds communities' capacity and control. They



also reflect the warning in the participation literature that formal structures may produce token involvement rather than real influence (Cornwall, 2017; Owusu et al., 2020).

The finding that decision-making had a unique effect on perceived sustainability even after information sharing and resource contribution were controlled suggests that decision-making is not simply a by-product of other forms of participation. However, the very high correlations among the participation dimensions also indicate that they operate together: communities that are well informed and contribute resources are also those that take part in decisions. Strengthening decision-making therefore requires parallel investment in information flows and in the practical capacity of Water User Committees.

Implications

Theoretically, the study supports the combined use of Participatory Development Theory and Empowerment Theory: the former explains why decision-making matters for sustainability, and the latter explains why its effect depends on inclusion and transparency. Practically, the findings suggest that district councils and implementing partners should move beyond holding meetings towards ensuring that meetings are inclusive, that decisions and constraints are explained openly, and that feedback mechanisms are institutionalised so that communities can see how their input shapes outcomes.

Limitations

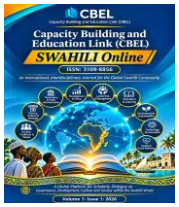
Sustainability was measured through community perceptions rather than technical indicators such as functionality rates or downtime. The study covered four wards in one district, and the cross-sectional design does not allow causal inferences. The very high correlations among participation dimensions also suggest that these constructs overlap, which limits the precision with which their separate effects can be estimated. Future research should combine community surveys with functionality audits of water points and track decision-making practices over time.

CONCLUSION

This study assessed the role of community decision-making in the sustainability of water projects in Tunduru District Council. It concludes that community decision-making is perceived as an important contributor to the sustainability of rural water projects: community meetings, representation by local leaders and feedback mechanisms are generally functioning, and decision-making is strongly associated with perceived sustainability. However, transparency in decision-making is the weakest dimension, and the inclusion of women and less powerful community members remains limited. Decision-making will contribute fully to sustainability only when it is inclusive, transparent and responsive.

Recommendations

i. Tunduru District Council, the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Agency (RUWASA) and implementing partners should institutionalise transparent decision-making by explaining technical designs, budgets and disbursement delays to communities in accessible language.
ii. Village governments and Water User Committees should schedule meetings at times and places that allow women to participate and should adopt practices that ensure women's views on water point location, fees and collection times are considered.
iii. Feedback mechanisms should be formalised, for example through regular community reports on water point performance, fee collection and maintenance decisions.
iv. Community leaders and committees should receive training in participatory facilitation and conflict management to reduce elite capture and encourage open discussion.



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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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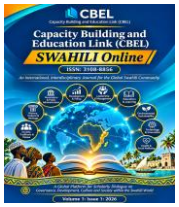
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