

# Avenues for Stakeholder Participation in the Effective Management of Public Markets in Urban Areas: A Case Study of Kabale and Mbarara Central Markets

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the avenues for stakeholder participation in the effective management of public markets in urban areas, specifically the Kabale and Mbarara Central Markets in Uganda. Communication is regarded as the foundation for the involvement facilitated by the availability of communication channels, inclusive engagement strategies, and capacity building. Despite interventions by jurisdictional authorities of these markets, governance problems persist, largely due to inadequate stakeholder engagement, ineffective communication, and unproductive participation practices. The new systems in redeveloped urban markets, such as in-built public address systems, frameworks for electing section heads and market leaders, and ministry guidelines, have not significantly resolved these governance issues. The study investigates these dynamics by exploring how challenges with the avenues for stakeholder participation affect the markets governance in urban areas with the aid of questionnaires and interviews with vendors, market leaders and the local authorities. The findings indicate that whereas vendors access contact information for market leaders and authorities through a variety of communication options, participation avenues such as market meetings and workshops remain low, suggesting that current communication methods may not effectively foster vendor engagement, possibly due to insufficient outreach. The study identifies deficiencies noting that while communication occurs, it is not fully comprehensive owing to limited capacity-building for meaningful, two-way communication. The study advocates for implementation of a multisource communication system, integration of quarterly stakeholder forums into management planning, prioritizing periodic briefings for vendors on various technical and non-technical subjects, and fostering accountability among their section leaders including regularly demanding feedback.

**Keywords:** Avenues for Stakeholder Participation, effective market management, Urban Public Markets.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, Uganda has undertaken efforts to enhance market management by reconstructing urban markets. These initiatives aim to increase domestic revenue for local governments and improve urban service delivery, among other objectives. This response follows concerns over market mismanagement, which necessitated a review of market laws, culminating in the enactment of the new Markets Act of 2023. Despite previous interventions by jurisdictional authorities, governance problems persist, largely due to inadequate stakeholder engagement, ineffective communication, and unproductive participation practices (Uganda Law Reform Commission and Ministry of Local Government, 2013). The new systems in redeveloped urban markets, such as in-built public address systems, frameworks for electing section heads and market leaders,

and ministry guidelines, have not significantly resolved these governance issues. These initiatives were designed to foster vendor participation, a principle rooted in Article One of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda (1995) and reinforced by the decentralization principles that led to the enactment of the Local Government Act (1997).

Proper management of urban public markets is essential not only for economic vitality and social cohesion but also for generating revenue that facilitates urban governance. Additionally, it mitigates instability among vendors, which can otherwise create the perception of failed governance. This study, focusing on Kabale and Mbarara Central Markets in Uganda, underscores the importance of involving vendors, local officials, and other stakeholders in effective market management. Avenues of stakeholder participation, such as comprehensive communication, inclusive engagement strategies, and capacity building (Warsaw, Archambault, He, & Miller, 2021; Kaddu, Nanyonga, & Haumba, 2020; Guenduez, Mettler, & Schedler, 2020), are crucial for meaningful participation. Effective engagement fosters transparency, accountability, and trust, all of which are critical to improving market performance. Research highlights that strong communication mechanisms enhance meaningful involvement, and digital platforms can facilitate stakeholder interactions, promoting inclusive governance.

However, several obstacles hinder successful stakeholder engagement, including power imbalances and unclear participation procedures, which contribute to ongoing tensions between vendors and market authorities. Overcoming these challenges is essential for fostering inclusive participation that supports vendors. Additionally, capacity building through training sessions, workshops, and educational resources can enhance vendors' understanding, skills, and knowledge related to market operations. In the absence of such initiatives, conflicts between vendors and authorities may escalate. Furthermore, barriers such as inadequate information and limited community involvement further restrict participation.

Although extensive research exists on stakeholder participation, significant gaps remain in the context of developing nations like Uganda. Most studies focus on developed countries and broadly on urban governance, often neglecting specific avenues for stakeholder participation, such as communication and capacity-building strategies within urban public markets. This study seeks to bridge these gaps by analyzing vendor participation in Kabale and Mbarara Central Markets and exploring ways to enhance these avenues for effective urban market management. Establishing and utilizing these participation avenues effectively will lay a strong foundation for vendor engagement and the smooth governance of public markets.

This paper is structured as follows: After the introduction, the second section presents a literature review, followed by the methodology in the third section. The fourth section discusses the findings, while the final section provides conclusions and recommendations.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication channels are essential for participation. Social media and digital transformation are key highlighted channels. Wan and Li (2024) examined various facets of city branding, emphasizing its intersection with social media and digital revolution in urban development. These can be facilitated through platforms like WhatsApp and telephone calls. They stressed the importance of leveraging stakeholders' roles through dynamic engagements made possible by live streaming and short videos. However, their study was limited to scholarly literature analysis, lacking empirical experience.

Guenduez, Mettler, and Schedler (2020) explored the Internet of Things in smart government, identifying it as a crucial technological underpinning that provides government officials with new communication avenues with the public. They noted that citizens contribute to governmental service value creation by utilizing public infrastructure or (un)knowingly disclosing data. This promotes algorithmic decision-making, boosts community sentiment, and enhances confidence in government activities. Although focused on Switzerland's smart governance, similar principles could apply to public urban market governance.

Reed *et al.* (2018) highlighted prerequisites for participation, including power dynamics, participant values, and epistemologies. These factors significantly impact engagement effectiveness. Process design

considerations enhance engagement outcomes across sociocultural, political, economic, and biophysical contexts. Engagement processes operate differently over various spatial and temporal scales. For example, workshops customized to stakeholders' unique needs and preferences can yield higher participation rates. Inclusivity in workshops, addressing urgent issues through diverse themes, fosters meaningful participation.

Cyril, Smith, and Renzaho (2016) emphasized the significance of empowerment measures. They stressed the need to examine the theoretical coherence, validity, and reliability of empowerment tools to ensure the sustainable efficiency of vendor empowerment programs. Uniform regional or national empowerment measurements could facilitate vendor empowerment comparisons across different markets and regions.

Key capacity-building areas in public markets include legal compliance, food hygiene, and safe food handling. Disobedience by vendors, particularly regarding authorities' regulations, is often defined as failure to follow laws, regulations, and legal orders, as supported by Hummel (2017). Vendors need knowledge of the legal and regulatory frameworks governing their business locations, regulatory bodies, and related issues. Bamhu (2019), in his research on street vendors and legal advocacy, recognized the need for vendors to understand legal and regulatory aspects managed by local governments. He examined local authorities' regulation of public spaces, bylaws, ordinances, and national laws affecting vendor rights. His study highlighted how knowledge of legislation processes enables vendors' participation in policy formulation. Though focused on street vendors, similar concerns apply to vendors in gazetted markets, as many markets in Uganda were established to reduce street vending. Capacity building on laws and regulations enhances vendor participation in policy legislation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Laws safeguarding vendor rights must be developed to encourage active involvement.

Food hygiene training and safe food handling are crucial capacity-building areas, modifying perceptions of food safety knowledge and practices (Ehuwa, Jaiswal, & Jaiswal, 2021). Fresh food vendors are vital in urban markets, selling essential foods like vegetables, tubers, fruits, fish, and meat. However, they are highly prone to contamination and perishability. Poor food handling skills may harm vendors' health and buyers' well-being. Authorities must address market management challenges by enhancing vendor training. Improved food handling skills help vendors minimize losses and prevent foodborne illnesses.

Stakeholder participation requires accessible communication venues. Cockburn-Wooten and McIntosh (2020) argue that access to information is crucial for planning and enhancing tourism accessibility in New Zealand. Iazzi *et al.* (2020) affirm that stakeholder engagement communication improves stakeholder perceptions. Though conducted in developed countries and the tourism sector, the same principle applies to urban markets, where information access facilitates vendor and customer planning.

Guenduez *et al.* (2020) highlight those new technologies, such as online platforms, enhance public engagement by collecting data for algorithmic decision-making, enabling personalized interactions and real-time infrastructure management. Literature affirms that stakeholder participation is enhanced through clear communication channels, inclusive engagement strategies, and capacity building. León and Rosen (2021) and Jiang (2021) emphasize the role of digital and smart technologies in urban governance, legitimizing and empowering participation mechanisms. Market management in the digital era must embrace digital platforms to improve communication and efficiency. Platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and TikTok not only facilitate information flow but also serve as marketing tools. For instance, a vendor in Mbarara Central Market may use videos to promote herbs, explaining their medicinal benefits and preparation methods.

Geekiyanage, Fernando, and Keraminiyage (2020) found that participation barriers include lack of information, limited community participation, and unclear engagement goals. They suggest solutions such as investing in participation initiatives, revising stakeholder engagement processes, shifting community attitudes, and enhancing capacity building. However, their study was not empirical and focused on disaster risk-sensitive urban development. This study aims to address these methodological and contextual gaps.

Decentralization is another key avenue for enhancing participation. Governance decentralization allows market vendors greater management flexibility based on geographical location (Smith, 2023). Market conditions vary across regions; for example, environmental factors in western Uganda differ from those in the central region.

Asante and Helbrecht (2020) explore spatial differences between urban and rural settings, while Kennedy and Sood (2019) highlight socio-spatial benefits affecting management strategies. Governance frameworks must adapt to geographical variations, making decentralization crucial for effective market management.

Da Cruz, Rode, and McQuarrie (2019) link decentralization to enhanced autonomy, technological innovation, multilevel governance, research development, democratic legitimacy, and stronger connections between authorities and market entities. Although these studies did not focus on markets, decentralization provides pathways for stakeholder participation in market governance.

Capacity building is a fundamental enabler of participation. Effective vendor engagement requires empowerment and capacity-building initiatives. DeCorby-Watson *et al.* (2018) examined capacity-building interventions in public health practice, highlighting methods such as online learning, workshops, technical support, self-directed learning, and multi-strategy approaches. These interventions enhance application, knowledge, skill development, self-efficacy, behavioral changes, and policy improvements. Although focused on health practice, these principles are applicable to market vendors' management training.

However, scholars caution against blanket approaches to capacity building. Organizations must evaluate methodologies for intervention effectiveness, ensuring alignment with specific goals. Interventions for vendor space allocation, for instance, may differ from those addressing market fee payments. Tailored interventions can be implemented through vendor associations, administrative units like market sections or zones, and voluntary training programs. Routine training and workshops should be established.

Several gaps emerge from the reviewed literature. Notably, context-specific research on communication as a prerequisite for participation is lacking. Studies by Cockburn-Wooten and McIntosh (2020) and Iazzi *et al.* (2020) emphasize information access for stakeholder engagement, but these studies focus on developed countries and the tourism sector. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining how the avenues for participation influence stakeholder participation in urban public markets in a developing country like Uganda.

## METHODOLOGY

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative research approaches using a case study design, which is particularly suited for an in-depth investigation of complex phenomena within their real-world context (Yin, 2018). The quantitative approach facilitated data collection from vendors in Mbarara and Kabale Central Markets, while the qualitative approach provided in-depth insights from key informants, including market leadership and local government elected and technical leaders.

The study was conducted in Kabale and Mbarara Central Markets. Key informants were purposively selected and included the Division Mayors (2), Division Town Clerks (2), Commercial Officers (2), Market Masters (2), and Vendors' Leaders (2) for Mbarara and Kabale Central Markets. Vendors were selected through a proportionally stratified random sampling method using Slovin's formula, ensuring representation from different market zones. This resulted in a sample of 288 vendors from Kabale Central Market and 308 vendors from Mbarara Central Market. The selected sample size was considered representative of the study population, encompassing key stakeholders such as vendors, market leadership, and local authorities, both elected and appointed.

A stratified sampling method was utilized to select vendors by dividing the target population into distinct strata based on business types, such as agro-inputs, butcheries, and electronics. This classification ensured comparability within each stratum according to relevant survey criteria. The varying number of vendors in each category allowed for proportionate respondent selection, enhancing the fairness and representativeness of the sample. Additionally, purposive sampling was employed to identify key participants, including political and technical heads and vendor association leaders, who were chosen for their expertise in stakeholder participation in public market management. The combination of these sampling techniques ensured a diverse and knowledgeable pool of respondents, contributing to the richness and reliability of the study's findings.



Research assistants were selected and trained on research ethics and procedures. Five research assistants per market (a total of 10) were employed to assist with questionnaire distribution, guidance during completion, and retrieval. Interviews were conducted by the researchers themselves. The questionnaires were pre-tested on 30 participants in Owino Market, Kabale, to ensure validity and reliability.

Quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to generate frequency distributions, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Qualitative data analysis began with reading interview transcripts to understand responses, followed by thematic coding based on the study's key constructs: comprehensive communication, inclusive engagement strategies, capacity building, and effective market management. Patterns and relationships within and across themes were examined to identify connections, nuances, and variations.

Ethical considerations were thoroughly addressed to uphold research integrity and respect participants' rights. All participants provided informed consent after being fully informed about the study's objectives, their involvement, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Confidentiality was strictly maintained by anonymizing responses, thereby protecting participants' identities.

## RESULTS

Respondents provided their opinions using Likert's Five-Point Scale, indicating their level of agreement or disagreement with the questionnaire statements. The scale ranged from 1 to 5, with the following abbreviations: Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Neutral (N), Agree (A), and Strongly Agree (SA). Their responses are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Avenues of Enhancing Stakeholder Participation in Kabale and Mbarara Central Markets (n=586)

Avenues of Stakeholder Participation	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	Std Dev
<b>Comprehensive Communication</b>							
Availability of market leadership contact information	10.2	8.9	11.4	44.4	25.1	3.65	1.23
Available communication platforms (e.g., online)	5.8	5.3	13.5	39.4	36	3.94	1.10
Sharing relevant market information	4.6	3.9	9.6	42.5	39.4	4.08	1.02
<b>Inclusive Engagement Strategies</b>							
Participation in market meetings	16.9	11.6	13	37.5	21	3.34	1.37
Participation in market workshops	17.4	17.4	15.9	32.6	16.7	3.13	1.35
Participation in focus group discussions	14.0	15.2	15.2	36.5	19.1	3.31	1.32
Participation in market surveys	16.2	19.1	16	30.9	17.7	3.14	1.35
<b>Capacity Building</b>							
Participation in training programs	21.5	16	18.9	36.2	7.3	2.91	1.29
Participation in workshops for skill enhancement	19.8	17.1	21	31.9	10.2	2.95	1.30
Access to educational resources	18.9	18.3	21.7	30.5	10.6	2.95	1.29

Source: Primary Data, (2024).

Table 1 presents findings on stakeholder participation in Kabale and Mbarara Central Markets. Regarding communication, respondents agreed that market leadership contact information is available (Mean = 3.65),

suggesting that vendors can easily reach market leaders. The presence of communication platforms, including online channels (Mean = 3.94), enhances information exchange. Additionally, respondents affirmed that relevant market updates and decisions are shared (Mean = 4.08), reinforcing the existence of feedback mechanisms.

However, responses on engagement strategies indicate limited participation. Respondents remained neutral about attending market meetings (Mean = 3.34), implying low vendor involvement in decision-making. This could be due to vendor disinterest or infrequent leadership engagement. Similarly, participation in workshops (Mean = 3.13) and focus group discussions (Mean = 3.31) was minimal, suggesting a lack of structured forums for market affairs. Participation in surveys was also low (Mean = 3.14), indicating limited vendor involvement in decision-making through data collection.

Capacity-building efforts were also found to be inadequate. Respondents were undecided on participating in training programs (Mean = 2.91) and workshops for skill enhancement (Mean = 2.95). Additionally, access to educational resources was limited (Mean = 2.95), indicating a lack of structured learning opportunities. These findings highlight the absence of deliberate efforts by market leadership to prioritize capacity-building initiatives.

The study reveals effective communication methods but highlights deficiencies in engagement strategies and capacity-building activities. While participatory governance emphasizes transparent communication for stakeholder involvement, these findings diverge from literature that underscores the importance of inclusive participation and capacity development (Da Cruz, Rode & McQuarrie, 2019). This suggests that although communication channels exist, they do not facilitate substantial engagement, necessitating structured interaction frameworks. The findings demonstrate that while vendors can communicate with market leadership, their influence on decision-making remains minimal. Limited participation in meetings, seminars, and surveys may stem from governance structures and socio-economic realities that often overlook vendor contributions.

### **Qualitative Data Presentation on the Significant Avenues of Stakeholder Participation in Kabale and Mbarara Central Markets**

The quantitative data is supported by qualitative findings, which indicate that there are generally good communication channels within the markets. The leadership in both Kabale and Mbarara Central Markets is composed of vendors elected from among themselves, making them easily accessible. Several avenues for communication were identified, ranked as follows:

1. Market loudspeakers/radio
2. Leadership committees
3. Market master
4. Open spaces (walls for notices)
5. Phone calls
6. Meetings
7. Verbal communication
8. WhatsApp groups

### **Market Loudspeakers/Radio Communication**

All respondents mentioned the presence of an installed loudspeaker system, operated from a designated studio room managed by an attendant under the authority of the market master. This system is used to broadcast general announcements throughout different market sections. The announcements typically include:

- Rent collection days by the Council
- Cleaning schedules
- Government programs (e.g., immunization)
- Notifications for meetings

- Alerts about visiting officials such as ministers

However, it was observed that the system primarily serves authorities and leaders in disseminating information to vendors rather than facilitating two-way communication. One respondent from Kabale noted:

*"Loudspeakers? We have used them before. Even the minister used them when he came here. But it's usually the Council people who use it. This year, it has only been used twice."* (A2, 28th March 2024)

### **Use of Open Spaces (Walls for Notices)**

Open spaces such as walls are used for pinning printed communication. This was confirmed through observed notices, including:

- Meat price lists (Kabale)
- Vendor SACCO meetings (Mbarara)
- Leadership committee lists
- Advertisements
- Warnings against improper waste disposal

### **Phone Calls and Meetings**

Phone call communication between vendors and market authorities was minimal, mainly used for reporting faults and misuse of facilities.

Meetings were described as rare and mainly held in response to vendor grievances or urgent issues. One respondent explained:

*"Well, the radio helps in their communication. It would be very hard to converge them for a meeting considering their business. The platform therefore helps them."* (A3, 4th April 2024)

When meetings do occur, they are often reactive rather than proactive. One respondent stated:

*"We usually meet the aggrieved and accused party."* (A1, 27th March 2024)

An example cited was:

*"Yes, recently when some people had forcefully occupied some lockups which were still vacant, I had to intervene with the police to settle the issue and force those who had occupied illegally out."* (A4, 5th April 2024)

### **Verbal and WhatsApp Communication**

Verbal communication was facilitated by dedicated individuals moving from stall to stall or lockup to lockup, particularly in Kabale Central Market. WhatsApp groups were also mentioned as a means of communication among vendors.

### **Challenges in Communication and Engagement**

These findings align with quantitative data indicating that while communication occurs, it is not fully comprehensive. There is limited capacity-building for meaningful, two-way communication.

Instances of inclusive engagement and capacity-building efforts have been more evident in Kabale Central Market and the Vendor SACCO in Mbarara Central Market. The key entities involved in training and sensitization included:

- Commercial Officer

- Techno Serve (NGO)
- Bank of Uganda
- MTN Uganda
- Ministry of Health

### Training and Sensitization Topics

The topics covered in these trainings included:

- Hygiene
- Market maintenance
- Financial inclusion
- Saving
- Business improvement strategies

One respondent provided an example:

*"Techno Serve gives grants to fresh food vendors. They recently provided tricycles (tukutuku). They train vendors on food security, how to trade, food storage, cleanliness, and proper stall arrangement."*

Another respondent added:

*"Some trainings focus on business improvement. Companies like MTN help out, teaching vendors about mobile money loans and MTN Momo services."* (A2, 28th March 2024)

### Lack of Official Inclusive Engagement Strategies

When asked about the origin of these initiatives, it was noted that they were driven by private organizations

rather than official market authorities. Individual vendors often participated in these programs voluntarily because of their involvement in specific organizations.

This indicates a gap in formal strategies for inclusive engagement and capacity building. While some vendors take the initiative to seek workshops and training opportunities, these efforts are largely individual rather than institutionally supported. The limited number of organizations offering these programs—such as Techno Serve, MTN, and SACCOs—suggests that many vendors may lack access to critical training and engagement opportunities.

All in all, while communication avenues exist in Kabale and Mbarara Central Markets, they are mostly one-way and authority-driven. Inclusive engagement efforts remain limited, with capacity-building initiatives largely initiated by external organizations rather than market leadership. This highlights the need for structured and institutionalized efforts to foster more effective communication, participation, and vendor empowerment.

### Hypothesis Testing

It was hypothesized that “different avenues of stakeholder participation significantly correlate to effective management of urban markets in Uganda.” To test the hypothesis, a correlation analysis was conducted using the Pearson Linear Correlation Coefficient (PLCC) statistical method. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: PLCC Statistics Between the Independent Variables and the Dependent Variable

Stakeholder Participation	Effective Management of Urban Markets
Comprehensive Communication	Pearson: .063, Sig: .128, N: 586



Inclusive Engagement Strategies	Pearson: .089*, Sig: .033, N: 586
Capacity Building	Pearson: .103*, Sig: .013, N: 586

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The results in Table 2 indicate that comprehensive communication does not have a significant correlation with the effective management of urban markets in Uganda ( $P = .063$ ,  $\text{Sig} = .128$ ). Since the computed significance value of 0.128 is greater than the 0.05 acceptance level, communication alone does not significantly contribute to effective market management. However, both inclusive engagement strategies and capacity building show significant positive correlations with effective management of urban markets ( $\text{Sig} = 0.033$  and  $0.013$ , respectively). This implies that enhancing stakeholder capacities through inclusive engagement strategies is likely to improve urban market management.

A multiple regression coefficient analysis was further conducted to determine the predictive power of the independent variables on the dependent variable. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Coefficients Between Independent Variables and the Dependent Variable

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	3.00	.171		17.56	.054
Communication	.041	.042	.043	.979	.328
Inclusive Engagement	.016	.043	.021	.378	.705
Capacity Building	.062	.040	.083	1.548	.122

$R = .115$ ,  $R \text{ Square} = .046$ ,  $\text{Adjusted } R \text{ Square} = .041$ ,  $F = 2.559$ ,  $\text{Sig.} = .054$

Dependent Variable: Effective Management of Urban Markets

According to Table 3, the Coefficient of Determination (Adjusted R Square) value is .041, indicating that stakeholder participation accounts for 4.1% of the variation in the effective management of urban markets in Uganda. Among the independent variables, capacity building was found to be the strongest predictor of effective market management ( $\text{Beta} = .083$ ), followed by communication ( $\text{Beta} = .043$ ), and inclusive engagement strategies ( $\text{Beta} = .021$ ) having the least predictive power.

## DISCUSSION

The availability of market leadership contact details garnered positive responses (mean = 3.65, Std Dev = 1.23), indicating stakeholders can reach authorities through phone, email, or other channels. Accessible contact details boost trust and allow stakeholders to voice concerns. Previous studies highlight open communication as fundamental to successful market management and participatory governance (Cockburn-Wooten & McIntosh, 2020; Iazzi *et al.*, 2020). The small proportion expressing discontent underscores the need for constant accessibility.

Online communication tools had a significantly beneficial outcome (mean = 3.94, Std Dev = 1.10). Modern methods, including social media and mobile applications, enhance stakeholder engagement by providing timely updates and real-time dialogue (Wan & Li, 2024). This is especially vital in urban markets where barriers like time or distance exist. High satisfaction levels indicate effectiveness, though gaps must be addressed to include users with low digital literacy.

Information sharing (e.g., posting updates and decisions) was the most satisfying experience (mean = 4.08, Std Dev = 1.02). Regular updates build trust and keep stakeholders informed (Geekiyange *et al.*, 2020). Despite high satisfaction, improvements are needed to sustain engagement.

Qualitative responses indicate vendors use WhatsApp groups and telephone calls for communication, aligning with León & Rosen (2021) and Jiang (2021), who highlight digital technologies' role in urban governance. Guenduez *et al.* (2020) emphasize that online platforms facilitate public engagement and data-driven decision-making.

Communication avenues partly address barriers to participation noted by Geekiyanage *et al.* (2020). However, effective community engagement requires capacity building. High satisfaction scores do not indicate comprehensive communication, as digital tools are not universally accessible, particularly among marginalized groups (Raihan *et al.*, 2024). A multi-channel communication plan, combining digital and traditional methods like community meetings and printed notices, is essential.

Communication is key to stakeholder engagement in market governance. Authorities must ensure reliable contact information, communication lines, and relevant news to reinforce trust (Lovan, Murray & Shaffer, 2017) and enhance collaborative decision-making.

According to Arnstein's Ladder of Participation, vendors were familiar with market policies but rarely guided the communication process. Moderate participation suggests tokenism—stakeholders are consulted (rung 4) or informed (rung 3) but lack influence over communication forums. Two-way communication is essential for trust and cooperative governance. Greater involvement is needed to transition stakeholders from consultation to active collaboration.

Market meeting attendance was moderate (mean = 3.34, Std Dev = 1.37). Regular meetings provide stakeholders a platform to give feedback and collaborate on management challenges. Moderate attendance suggests barriers like lack of awareness or time constraints. Research shows well-organized meetings and inclusive decision-making improve engagement (Stakeholder Engagement Plan, 2022). Authorities should schedule meetings at convenient times and announce them well in advance. Short in-person meetings combined with follow-up conversations via WhatsApp can be utilized in hybrid conference models to overcome these challenges. Scheduling these meetings for vendor-friendly hours—early evenings when business is slower—helps to boost attendance. Furthermore, thematic seminars focusing on urgent and relevant topics such as food safety, sanitation standards, or fee conflicts can capture broader interest. These tailored approaches enhance relevance and convenience, thereby increasing the significance and ease of participation for time-constrained merchants.

Workshop participation was slightly lower (mean = 3.13, Std Dev = 1.35). Workshops facilitate discussions on market-related topics and capacity-building, but low attendance may reflect inadequate outreach or irrelevant themes. Research suggests that tailored workshops improve participation (Reed *et al.*, 2018).

Although decentralized leadership structures exist through section heads/counsellors, the absence of a consultation framework limits participation. Kennedy & Sood (2019) highlight decentralization's socio-spatial benefits, while Da Cruz, Rode & McQuarrie (2019) emphasize its role in fostering innovation, multilevel governance, and democratic legitimacy. The lack of decentralized structures in Kabale and Mbarara Central Markets restricts vendor participation.

Challenges such as inadequate awareness, logistical barriers, and trust deficits necessitate targeted strategies. Marginalized groups, including women and individuals with disabilities, require tailored engagement methods. Combining digital and face-to-face tools enhances accessibility (Tan *et al.*, 2022). Market authorities must foster an inclusive environment for meetings, workshops, FGDs, and surveys to enhance transparency and trust (Erfani & Roe, 2020).

Assessing participation against Arnstein's Ladder, low vendor engagement in FGDs, workshops, and meetings suggests limited influence. At Consultation (rung 4) or Placation (rung 5), stakeholders provide input but lack decision-making power. Increased participation in decision-making committees can elevate engagement to Partnership (rung 6).

Limited capacity-building opportunities were evident, with no consensus on participation in training and educational programs. DeCorby-Watson *et al.* (2018) identify online learning, workshops, technical support, and communities of practice as key capacity-building avenues. Limited technology use, such as WhatsApp, phone calls, and loudspeakers, primarily serves information dissemination rather than training. Capacity-building deficiencies contribute to conflicts between vendors and authorities, as highlighted by Hummel (2017). Vendors must be informed about legal regulations governing their operations (Bamhu, 2019), as lack of awareness undermines participation.

Capacity building also affects health and safety. Training on food hygiene and safe handling is crucial for fresh food vendors (Ehuwa, Jaiswal & Jaiswal, 2021). Contaminated food poses risks to vendors and consumers. Enhancing knowledge in this area benefits vendors, customers, and authorities by ensuring compliance with health policies.

Training involvement scored the lowest (mean = 2.91, Std Dev = 1.29). Enhancing stakeholders' competencies is essential for meaningful market participation. Poor attendance may stem from unawareness or limited access to training. Context-specific training tailored to vendors' needs strengthens governance and management functions (Stakeholder Engagement Plan, 2022). Targeted training in governance, hygiene, and legal compliance can address these gaps.

Obstacles to stakeholder participation include technological constraints, lack of digital skills, and socio-psychological issues such as fear of retaliation and time constraints. Although various communication avenues like WhatsApp, market loudspeakers, and notice boards exist, obstacles prevent vendors from engaging in market governance. The research shows that WhatsApp is an effective communication tool (mean = 3.94); however, not all vendors have the necessary skills or resources to participate. Raihan *et al.* (2024) point out that digital inequality continues in developing regions due to limited access to smartphones, unreliable internet, and low levels of digital literacy. These challenges especially affect older vendors, individuals with less formal education, and marginalized groups like women and people with disabilities, limiting their access to updates and participation in discussions. Additionally, formal communication may not match the everyday language used by market vendors. Announcements and training sessions, frequently presented in English or technical jargon, can be hard for vendors with limited education to comprehend, restricting their chances for meaningful involvement (Geekiyanage *et al.*, 2020).

Qualitative data indicates that market meetings usually adopt a reactive stance instead of a proactive approach, frequently concentrating on conflict resolution (A1, 27th March 2024). This mindset restricts open communication where numerous vendors are reluctant to voice their concerns, fearing they may be viewed as troublemakers or could face probable counterattack from authorities. This anxiety undermines trust and transparency (Erfani & Roe, 2020). Moreover, a time-sensitive environment complicates attendance during busy hours. The findings indicate that inclusive participation must consider human, social, and cultural aspects. Effective stakeholder engagement needs to offer low-tech, easily accessible communication (e.g., visual posters in local languages, in-person stall visits), accommodate varying schedules, and foster a safe atmosphere for feedback, tackling both digital exclusion and social concerns.

Based on theoretical research and empirical data emphasizing their importance in participatory governance, the chosen variables- comprehensible communication, inclusive engagement strategies, and capacity building- were selected. These models represent the key processes through which suppliers engage with market leaders, gather data, and enhance competencies. However, the regression analysis revealed that effective market management displayed a weak and statistically insignificant correlation with communication ( $\beta = .043$ ,  $p = .328$ ). This indicates that while communication is essential, it may function more as a facilitator than a catalyst for meaningful involvement. It raises awareness but does not produce action. Communication may lead to passive knowledge rather than active engagement without frameworks for skill enhancement or decision-making. Future models could benefit from factors like political trust, enforcement systems, or leadership accountability to clarify market governance outcomes.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research identified communication techniques, inclusive engagement approaches, and capacity-building as essential avenues for improving stakeholder participation. While communication tactics, including the use of contact platforms informed by pertinent market insights, demonstrated moderate efficacy, challenges related to access and inclusivity persisted. The irregularity of participation hindered comprehensive engagement. Furthermore, capacity-building initiatives were limited, offering only sporadic training sessions and educational resources to market participants. Without deliberate efforts to integrate these tools, stakeholder interaction would remain fragmented, undermining market governance and restricting opportunities for sustainable and inclusive market advancement. Addressing these challenges requires a systematic approach centered on continuous stakeholder engagement and sustainable capacity development.

To mitigate the risk of miscommunication, market authorities should implement a multisource communication system—such as SMS alerts, installed market radio announcements, WhatsApp groups, and noticeboards—to provide vendors and stakeholders with real-time updates on key developments, including policy changes, fee structures, tax regimes, and shifts in industrial production. This system will enhance inclusivity by offering multiple communication channels tailored to vendors' accessibility and affordability. Each market should also establish a dedicated information center staffed with personnel responsible for disseminating updates on policies, regulations, and upcoming meetings. Additionally, authorities should explore the development of a mobile application that provides market updates, policy changes, and management decisions to vendors in real time.

Market authorities should integrate quarterly stakeholder forums into their management planning to solicit feedback from vendors, local government representatives, and community members on market governance issues. These forums should be structured around specific management topics and, where feasible, conducted via digital platforms such as WhatsApp or other approved applications, considering the mobility constraints of vendors. Furthermore, section representatives should be empowered to establish stakeholder committees to broaden representation in decision-making processes. These committees should ensure the inclusion of marginalized groups such as women, youth, and persons with disabilities, ensuring that their perspectives are considered in governance decisions.

Authorities should also prioritize periodic briefings for vendors on various technical and non-technical subjects, including financial management, policy interpretation, business development, and leadership skills. Collaborations with business development agencies, financial institutions, and NGOs can facilitate small business training, mentorship programs, and entrepreneurial skill development. Study tours should be encouraged, enabling market leaders and vendors to learn best practices from well-managed markets in Uganda and beyond. These tours can be funded through corporate sponsorships, NGO support, or collective vendor contributions. Authorities should also develop a framework to institutionalize capacity building, integrating it into budget allocations. This should include a vendor training program funded by market fees or local government budgets, focusing on hygiene, legal compliance, and business skills. A specific fee managed by the market leadership structure can be levied for the purpose if the funds do not fit into the local government budget.

Authorities should establish a pilot program with three components: monthly workshops by commercial officers, peer-led training from section heads, and subsidized online learning resources. These workshops may cover financial literacy, hygiene standards, and legal compliance, inspired by successful MTN Uganda programs that educated vendors on mobile money loans and digital tools. Peer-led training by section leaders can be explored, with trust, it can enhance knowledge sharing in local dialects. Collaborations with telecom companies could provide subsidized data bundles or free access to training platforms, bridging the digital gap. Initial expenses will include facilitator fees, printed materials, and technical support, but potential long-term benefits—improved vendor compliance, greater efficiency, and better public health—justify the investment. Enhanced vendor skills will minimize governance disputes and promote sustainable market management.

Given that capacity-building remains a fundamental challenge affecting market governance, vendors should take an active role in fostering accountability among their section leaders, regularly demanding feedback and



ensuring access to updated information. Authorities should emphasize capacity-building as central to vendor engagement by partnering with private entities such as telecom companies, financial institutions, NGOs, and educational institutions. These partnerships can enhance both communication platforms and vendors' understanding of the significance of information exchange. Additionally, vendors should be made aware of the costs associated with market facilities—such as maintenance, operational mechanisms, and public utilities—to reinforce their appreciation of infrastructure value and encourage a sense of ownership and responsibility.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study acknowledges various constraints that could impact the generalizability and interpretation of its findings. The regression model explains 4.1% of the variance, while other unmeasured factors, such as political dynamics, vendor leadership accountability, and cultural norms, might significantly influence stakeholder participation and improve explanatory capacity for better market management.

The study concentrated only on central markets in Kabale and Mbarara. Although the central markets setting in Uganda exhibits great degrees of homogeneity, the possible relevance of its results to other public markets in Uganda with different administrative or socio-economic settings may be limited.

Data was collected in 2024, possibly ignoring seasonal participation fluctuations brought on by agricultural cycles, holidays, or climate change. The study also neglected to consider non-vendor participants whose influence could enhance the knowledge of participation dynamics: suppliers, transporters, and consumers. Future studies should definitely include longitudinal studies to track trends over time and a more extensive spectrum of stakeholder viewpoints using consumer surveys or comparative analyses between urban and rural markets.

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