

# Why rural poverty will remain unless PDM goes further



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Uganda's Parish Development Model (PDM) was launched and brought with it a strong promise – to take development to the parish and get households out of subsistence and into the money economy. This promise directly addresses the longstanding frustration that large-scale programs often fail to reach the intended beneficiaries. Three years on, however, emerging evidence shows that while PDM has helped to improve administrative reach, rural poverty will continue to be present unless the model goes further than it does at present.

The magnitude of the problem has remained acute. According to the National Population and Housing Census data by Uganda of 2024, 33.1 per cent of households are still caught in the subsistence economy. In absolute terms, that is 3.5 million households facing problems meeting basic needs through low-productivity activities. PDM aims to transform precisely these types of households. Yet existing census data also contains the extent of present limited progress. Of the households included in the subsistence economy, only 23.5 per cent said they benefited from PDM funds in the 12 months before the census. In other words, over three-quarters of the poorest households were yet to feel the direct financial support of the programme. Even where PDM has been reaching communities, coverage has been extremely patchy.

In Sebei, 76.3 per cent of subsistence households said they benefited, and in Busoga, the number was only 14.3 per cent. These disparities raise

challenging questions about equity, implementation capacity, and local conditions.

More fundamentally, however, poverty in rural Uganda is not an access-to-credit problem. The census indicates that 74.5 percent of households in the subsistence economy depend on subsistence farming as the main source of livelihood, and only 10.4 percent engage in income-generating enterprises. This reflects a structural reality, namely that the majority of rural households barely produce surplus, have weak markets and have little capacity to convert loans into sustained income. Under such conditions, credit with no productivity improvements and no access to markets is in danger of being a burden rather than a path out of poverty.

PDM's achievement so far is more real – with respect to household identification, local coordination, and access to small-scale finance. These are necessary steps. But they are not sufficient for transformation. Agricultural productivity is still limited by under-resourced agricultural extension services. The markets are still thin, volatile, and expensive to enter. Climate downdrafts continue to erode gains. Parish and sub-county institutions are supposed to handle complex financial and administrative work with limited manpower and operational resources.

If PDM is to go further, first it has to move beyond credit to productivity. Loans cannot boost the households out of poverty when the productivity in agriculture is low and technical support is thin. Still, extension services at the parish and sub-county level are under-resourced

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and understaffed. Households, in the absence of consistent advice on enterprise choice, production methodology, and risk management, must make complex decisions on their own, often leading to predictable outcomes.

Due to land constraints, there is a further limit to the extent that PDM can do. Census data reveals that only 16.7 percent of Ugandans own land, and only 58 percent of adults have legally recognised documentation. For households that cannot secure access to land, it is risky to try to expand production or invest in enterprises. Yet land and tenure issues remain largely outside the scope of PDM, even though it helps determine who is in a position to transition realistically into the money economy.

None of this is to dismiss PDM. On the contrary, it represents a significant shift in the organisation of development, particularly through improved household identification and local coordination. But until it is part of a larger rural transformation strategy with the Government of Uganda at the helm, PDM runs the risk of repeating a familiar pattern: access but not much change.

Rural poverty will not be over just because money arrives at the parish. It will end when households are able to produce more, reliably sell, survive shocks and build assets over time. PDM has created an opportunity. Going further is the only way to make sure that it leads to real transformation.

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