



Using farmer groups to empower small-holder rural farmers in Hoima district, mid-western Uganda

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Abstract

Farmer groups are a widespread feature in Sub-Saharan African countries, and have become particularly important in Hoima district, mid-western Uganda. Recent surveys have revealed the importance of Small-Holder Farmer Groups in Uganda as a method for generating food, income, and employment. Government and Non-Governmental Organisations have encouraged rural farmers to join SHFGs so that extension services and agricultural inputs can be easily provided. Little information currently exists about the functioning of these groups, and whether their effectiveness can be improved. Research on FGs usually concentrates on the allegation that membership to the groups empowers farmers. This study investigates empowerment and Small-Holder Farmer Groups in Hoima district so as to find out whether SHFG membership is a basis of empowerment to small-holder farmers. The findings reveal that membership in itself has a fractional contribution to empowerment, whereas access to agricultural information and markets are major sources of empowerment. Nonetheless, the contribution of membership to the Small-Holder Farmer Group is necessary seeing that it can facilitate members to obtain essential information on a number of agricultural inputs and available markets. This paper draws on recent field-based research in which the experiences of members in fifteen SHFGs were investigated. Results reveal that through decision-making, inter-personal action and group action, Small-Holder Farmer Groups can be a possible channel for empowerment in Hoima district. However, information remains paramount and should be taken note of.

Keywords: Empowerment; Small-Holder Farmer Group; Decision-Making; Inter-Personal; Group Action

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1. Introduction

Farmer Groups (FGs) are loosely described as bodies elected with intention of enhancing local involvement and allow wider locally-based approaches to making decisions among farming communities. From a broader opinion, FGs are perceived to be one of the key tools for empowering small-holder farmers in both rural and peri-urban settings in a number of Less-Developed Countries (LDCs) that have proven to be one of the reliable models of stakeholder groups. As a consequence, they have become one of the most prominent means of attaining household food security as well as enhancing livelihoods of a number of small-holder farming communities. Small-holder Farmer Groups (SHFGs) are either associations or enterprise- specialised. Available examples include: Farmer associations in Swaziland (Nicollete et al., 2017), Rice FGs in Uganda (Karubanga et al., 2017), Vegetable FGs in China (Xiong et al., 2016), Cocoa FGs in Ghana (Ehiakpor et al., 2016), Dairy FGs in Spain (Castro et al., 2015), to point out only a few. As a result, SHFGs are sole – function bodies and are different from other elected bodies such as local councils that have complex responsibilities.

On the one hand, the central suggestion raised by optimists in support of SHFGs is that they present prospects for both demonstrating and sharing of necessary information in areas that are essential for Small-Holder Rural Farmers (SHRFs), especially unwaged women and youths in LDCs (Lumadi, 2017:124). A recent study reveals that when SHRFs are created, the flow of key information between service providers and local target groups, for example regarding climate change tends to have considerable increase (Mhlanga-Ndlovu and Nhamo, 2017:39). As a consequence, representatives of local farmers can provide information that not only influences the quality of agricultural input but also enlarges the volume of output as well as excellence of the agricultural markets (Murisa, 2011:1146). There is prospect that SHRFs can help in raising awareness among local farmers about the *raison d'être* of a number of government initiatives, for example, the benefits of being cognisant about the safety of farm inputs such as planting materials or regular vaccination of farm animals and birds. The case in Nigeria reveals that SHFGs facilitate sale of agricultural produce through appropriate publicity – and awareness drives as well as participatory market analyses (Anigbogu et al., 2016). In some cases, SHFGs enhance the degree of transparency in identifying needs and priorities provided that more SHRFs become concerned in sharing agricultural information and are capable of scrutinizing how public inputs are shared out by the lower local government agricultural extension workers (Steinke and Van Etten, 2017:357).

On the other hand, pessimists of SHFGs reveal that the free nature of such bodies is under scrutiny. For example, in their study, Nakazi et al. (2017) acknowledge the efficiency of SHFGs in aspects of political influence, training, access to inputs, creation of enterprises, as well as method and aggressiveness in dynamic markets, but give emphasis to the view that there are gender-based disparities in group leadership positions. SHFGs members are in a number of cases chosen on the basis of either geographical proximity or friendship rather than through appropriate methods such as agricultural zoning. This tendency, in some way, generates laxity among group members that they end up sidetracking from the core principles before realising any goals. Likewise, Agricultural Extension Workers (AEWs) tend to favour groups that have literate and well-off farmers that are perceived to “cooperate” since they require less attention, compared with illiterate farmers that are in dire need and necessitate the AEWs to guide them at every step. In other words, the local influential will oftentimes be favoured as active members of SHFGs. In cases where agricultural zoning is advocated, an

unofficial approach can be agreed to whereby membership are selected basing on the size of agricultural holding rather than by democratic zoning. For example, one of the latest studies reveals that absence of long-term flexibility of agricultural policies and source of information affect farmer engagement both within the group and across groups (Burbi et al., 2016:467).

For this study, the central focus is about the extent to which members of SHFGs are empowered in four specific aspects, namely; decision-making, individual action, inter-personal action and community action (Pigg, 2002:108). While a study conducted in Punjab, India reveals that SHFGs improved the socio-economic status of members as individuals, between individuals and as a community (Kaira et al., 2012:526), that study did not show whether improved socio-economic status was also associated to empowerment of members. Even as a number of donor organisations support bodies that are representative, liberals maintain that most civil servants and local experts remain uncertain to devolve unrestricted power to local communities, thus constraining individual and group empowerment. As a consequence, SHFGs lack adequate space to contribute in the general design of various enterprises engaged in by local members. Even when it comes to resolutions that require adjusting to local conditions, local decision-making authority emerging at SHFG level is frustrated. Such frustration on decision-making authority becomes one of the major reasons why SHFGs are construed as expressions of symbolism or democratic make-ups but not effective groups. By implication, there is danger that executive leaders of SHFGs end up dominating group discussions, both by setting the agenda for meetings and by virtue of their agricultural background and professional knowledge. This inhibits the notion of empowerment in spite of being considered necessary in this study.

From available literature on SHFGs, it is clear that both tokenism as well as elitism appear and become challenges. Tokenism is revealed through the inter-reliant role of such factions as symbols of apparent distribution of power that is not genuine; this view is illustrated by Crick (2016:176). Elitism is revealed through national – and local elites take exclusive control in excess of and dictate to such groups at the cost of SHFGs and local representatives of the rural or peri-urban farming community (Mukharji, 2017:355). For example, a study by Panda (2014:53) reveals that elite capture was applied in the National Poverty Alleviation (NPA) Programme of India at the expense of the underprivileged such as small-holder rural farmers in the country. Consequently, this situation can become known from the approach used to select SHFG members: whether they are grouped by AEWs? Or the SHFGs get formed by natural selection and are self-accounting?

Concerning the threats of exclusiveness which result from elitism, a study conducted in China demonstrates that the grouped peasantry class varied from regular farmers given that they had additional agricultural information and superior revenue (Ip and Price, 2016:28). Group members often assumed authority in a number of local public bodies such as primary schools and religions. Furthermore, incumbents of certain leadership positions such as chairperson and sub-county AEWs could exercise great influence on how groups worked and dealt with their responsibilities. They represented a prospective partnership, in comparison to group members with low agricultural output and little awareness of their privileges and duties. A study by Ip and Price (2016) found no sign of elitism favouring politicians and professionals such as sub-county AEWs in Uganda, for none of the two groups desired to take part in local level activities such as SHFG tasks. This indicates that the benefits – and degree of decision-making power accessible through SHFGs was of limited significance to such groups. If this holds sway, it might demonstrate that such SHFGs are just symbols rather

than a platform of ensuring authentic involvement; which is why (Denham, 2002:17) present empowerment as an end in itself rather than one of the necessary means.

2. Purpose of the study

The current study endeavours to describe how SHFGs in Uganda are created, and the extent to which their members have an influence in decision-making. Specifically, the study aims to discuss whether SHFG members experience more empowerment than non-SHFG members. As demonstrated above, there appears to be a divergence between essential branches of the intellectual society and the wider donor community about the empowering contribution of SHFGs in essential community groups for example small-holder farmers. While a number of donor groups such as European Union and USAID have a tendency to support the design of SHFGs as one of the instruments for empowering the poor rural communities, the intellectual narrative is to a certain extent suspicious of the contribution of these groups. Those organisations maintain that target groups are often used to serve as tools of dominion for intermediary agencies and the authority allowed to members is somewhat restricted.

The present study contributes to knowledge by probing the truth behind the empowering contribution of one set of SHFGs in one sub-region, mid-western Uganda. The study aims to ascertain the empowering contribution by determining and weighing perceived prospects between SHFG members and non-SHFG members for participating in decisions concerning agricultural enterprise management through individual action, inter-personal action and community action. If there is no difference in terms of empowerment, the interpretation shall be that groups have no contribution. If there is a difference supportive of SHFG membership, the interpretation shall demonstrate that SHFGs have an empowering contribution. Besides, the article looks at whether a set of selected aspects other than membership to SHFG describe differences in empowerment among SHFG members. The selected aspects include: identification and selection of inputs, control of pests and diseases, mobilisation of members, nurturing relations, planning and budgeting, expenditure decisions, choice of pesticides and insecticides, and produce processing. While attention is on SHFGs in Hoima district, the aspects included have a connection with the wider debate on devolution of authority and beneficiary involvement in basic service delivery. This study aimed to describe empowerment of small-holder rural farmers using the perspective of membership to SHFGs. Specifically the study explained the establishment and composition of SHFGs; compared whether SHFG members were more empowered than non-SHFG members in terms of decision making, individual action, inter-personal action and community action.

3. The methodology

This article is an outcome of a phenomenological study conducted in Hoima district, mid-western Uganda between March and December 2017. It was phenomenological aimed to explain the initiative of small-holder rural farmers' empowerment from the individuals' perspective of membership to SHFGs. It was conducted on

existing groups and all participants were small-holder farmers having related characteristics. Hoima district was purposely selected with the view to carry out an intensive study of the SHFGs in one comparable socio-economic context. A total of 12 SHFGs in six sub-counties were reached with guidance from the appropriate sub-county AEWs and relevant sub-county chiefs. In each sub-county, SHFGs would be chosen from diverse parish settings and each SHFG was treated as a Focus Group (FG). Data were gathered using a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guide that was structured along the four items (decision making, individual action, inter-personal action and community action) intended to facilitate a discussion of experiences of different SHFG members. The area language (Runyakitara) was used during all FGDs. This study followed the ethical requirements for carrying out research in Uganda; consent from the appropriate authorities was obtained and every participant in the selected SHFGs was allowed to take part at two levels, namely individual and group. Data were analysed cumulatively throughout the data collection process and thematic analysis was used to present trends and patterns of empowerment by means of the SHFG structure.

4. The conceptual framework

The initiative of “empowerment” often comes to the fore when probing how underprivileged households and or individuals can flee from poverty, enhance their conditions of living, and set up a self-governing society – consequently, the socio-economic and political dimensions emerge. On the other hand, studies describe empowerment as a process by which an individual or group obtains and or reinforces the resources needed to facilitate individual choices, critical judgment and attainment of individual or group goals (Dolničar and Fortunati, 2014:165). Other studies consider empowerment as “a drive” towards enabling the individual and or group to have better ability, self-worth, more control, self-assurance, self-esteem, self-determination, collective relations, welfare, and shared assist (Dolničar and Fortunati, 2014). On the other hand, academic tones reveal that empowerment is perhaps closer to what can be termed “street chat”. For example, when International Agencies and State Governments espouse the idea of empowerment as one of the components of their dictionary, they apply it to persuade those that are subject to adjudicate their actions (García and Meier, 2012:371). Even though ‘power’ is the main element of empowerment, Kaiser and Rusch (2015:2) consider empowerment in terms of “state of increasing power” which incorporates the ability to exercise power with intent to achieve a group’s or an individual’s aims and assignments in a community. While a number of studies (such as Kirk et al., 2016:590) concur that empowerment relates with the notion of power, they underscore the view that empowerment involves “a process of being given or gaining equitable power, connection and a sense of hospitality”. This viewpoint reveals that empowerment entails improved power to an individual and or a group.

The current study describes empowerment in terms of three natures of actions, namely: individual action, inter-personal action and group action. As a result, the study interrogates whether SHFG structures lead to empowerment of members; as individuals, between individuals and as SHFG groups and it aims to respond to this question by taking on a few initiatives from Nakazi et al. (2017) who projected empowerment as “a consequence of within the structure and agency in terms of involvement”. Structure, here, refers to the

organisational limitations and opportunities individuals and groups come across when making choices in a variety of situations (Bakewell, 2010:1690); while agency suggests individual and group ability to reach focused decisions (Vlase and Voicu, 2012:2419; Pigg, 2002:110). Though particular choices are presented, individuals might not have the abilities required to wholly or partially take advantage of them. For example, members of SHFGs can obtain an opportunity to get involved in making decisions about preparation of the budget in their groups, however they may avoid active involvement especially when it comes to taking a stand on issues due to inadequate ability or think the technical officials such as AEWs have better skill in a certain field.

Apart from distinguishing structure and agency, studies have advocated for a number of ways for measuring empowerment in diverse contexts. For example, the Service User Psychological Empowerment Scale (SUPES) was developed to assess three elements, namely: intrapersonal, interactional and behavioural (Van Dop et al 2016:653). This reveals that empowerment is three-dimensional: empowerment of an individual may be based on whether a prospect to make an option is available; or empowerment can suggest that an individual makes use of the available option; or empowerment will appear when the option leads to the desired outcome (Eskildsen et al., 2017:157). As a result, a SHRF in Uganda could have the option to join an SHFG only if the group exists in that area. Even though the SHFG exists, the SHRF can decide not to take advantage of the available option due to personal or environmental limitations since a number of farmers assume that SHFGs are not beneficial. After all, a study by Islam et al. (2011:427) on “sustainable farmer-led extension groups” reveals that even if the SHRF chooses to join an SHFG, they can still abandon it since SHFGs are perceived to be expensive, creating a dependency syndrome and are prone to un-sustainability. However, anecdotal evidence reveals that a number of SHFGs fail due to poor management and exploitation of members by the group leadership.

5. The findings: Farmer groups for SHRF empowerment

This section is presented in cognisance of all the three dimensions of empowerment revealed by Van Dop et al. (2016:653) in the SUPES and further echoed by Mascue and Askvik (2017:783), which are: whether an opportunity is accessible; making use of the available option; and whether the available option leads to a desired outcome. Consequently, focus is put on three aspects, namely: (a) establishment and composition of SHFGs (b) methods of attaining SHFG membership and (c) the incidence of empowerment on account of individual membership to SHFGs in terms of decision making, inter-personal action and group action.

5.1. Establishment and composition of SHFGs in Hoima district

At the national level, the law established SHFGs under the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS) Act in 2001 (NAADS, 2002). Consequently, the NAADS policy emerged when Government of Uganda designed a comprehensive medium term economic development action plan – the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP) in 1997 as a response aimed to reduce poverty as well as attending to bottlenecks to rural development (Joughin and Kjær, 2010:62). According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Fisheries

(2000:2), the PEAP was informed by three principles, namely: (i) eradicating mass poverty; (ii) raising small-holder rural farmer household incomes; and (iii) Improving the quality of life of the majority of the population. Its (PEAP) implementation was hinged on the decentralization policy framework, which devolved powers, mandates, responsibilities and functions for service delivery to local governments. The PEAP preceded Plan for Modernization of Agriculture (PAM), which sought to deal with obstacles to agricultural productivity such as poor animal husbandry and inadequate utilisation of improved agricultural inputs (Ramirez, 2007:2). The PMA was informed by seven components, including NAADS, with the intention of giving remedy to past misdeeds in the system of delivering agricultural extension services. As a result, specific focus was put to increasing farmers' access to information, knowledge and technology meant for commercial agricultural production (NAADS, 2002). While the NAADS program was designed in 1999, studies reveal that it was transformed into a semi-autonomous body using the NAADS Act of June 2001 (Namara and Mugenyi, 2004:87). The program aimed to empower farmers to demand and control agricultural extension services away from previous extension services which relegated farmers to passive recipients. Its implementation commenced in July 2001 in six trailblazing districts. Between April and May 2002, additional five sub counties of each of the pioneer districts were included as well as taking new districts across 100 sub counties. In 2003/2004 financial year, five more districts and 53 new sub counties were added thus taking the coverage to 21 districts and 153 sub counties nationwide.

Through the NAADS Act, Government expected meetings and or workshops to guide the implementation of the programme (Government of Uganda, 2001). Consequently, it was revealed that membership to each SHFG ranges between 10 and 15 members, of whom $\frac{1}{3}$ have to be female. To this point, a number of SHFGs have incorporated the component of savings and credit schemes (SACCOs) so as to enable their members attain diversification. As a consequence, the number of members has swollen to 40 to 45 per SHFG. However, there is no minimum level of formal education prescribed; this reveals that every adult farmer is eligible to becoming an SHFG member, regardless of their literacy and size of agricultural holding. The study reveals that SHFGs were expected to enhance trust among members; other studies indicate that was attained in countries such as Columbia, Croatia, and Ukraine (Narayan, 2002:41).

5.2. Methods of attaining membership to the SHFG

The study identified a number of methods through which a Small-Holder Rural Farmer (SHRF) becomes an SHFG member in Hoima district. The participants were asked about how they were enrolled into the respective SHFGs. While analysts, such as Nakazi et al. (2017), maintain that the methods through which members are enlisted to this kind of group do not reveal the will of prospective members and can weaken the spirit of those bodies, participants in the study demonstrated that membership to SHFGs was attained using any of the four methods, namely: (i) Membership by consensus, (ii) Membership by interest, (iii) Membership by co-option, and (iv) Ex-officio membership.

Previous studies demonstrate that when membership revolves around consensus then a prospective member rarely looks at the objectives of the group as long as that member is close to some members therein. Particularly, Wiredu (2010:228) has revealed that membership by consensus involves an approach wherein

prospective members are invited on the basis of “how close one is to members” in the group. During the study, 54% of the participants confirmed having been enlisted through this method. According to García and Meier (2012:365), Interest Groups have greater benefits including negotiating and organisational change which are essential elements of progress. Membership by interest and membership by co-option were reported to have been used to enlist 24% and 18% of the SHFG members respectively. The fourth method of being enlisted as an SHFG member is being an ex-officio; it relates to a situation where a member is selected on the basis of their technical knowledge and skills which are perceived beneficial to the group afterwards. For example, a prominent but intensive rural farmer who has been successful in the business on a sustainable level can be convinced to become an SHFG member so that members can learn from his or her success story.

Results revealed that an ex-officio can be a skilled individual in a key agricultural enterprise and or persons with extensive networks that are willing to offer the SHFG with any form of support. Support, in this case, is either direct or by connecting the SHFG to secondary supporters such as nongovernmental organisations and or corporate agencies interested to work with rural house-holds. However, results reveal that personal factors had substantial contribution to the method of proposing and deciding on a member in particular when a prospective member is joining an SHFG later following its formation. Analysts (such as Schimmel and Jacobs, 2011:157) reveal that the single democratic method is for a prospective member to be enlisted through an election where all current members get involved without restraint. They suggest that consensus can propagate a situation where a number of members become prejudiced by those that persuade a potential SHFG member. However, interviews did not expose any damage resulting from prejudice in any of the SHFGs that participated in the study.

5.3. Incidence of empowerment in the SHFGs

The incidence of empowerment is presented using decisions and or experience in terms of eleven aspects, namely: Identification and selection of agricultural inputs; Control of pests and diseases; Mobilisation of members for SHFG activity; Nurturing of SHFG – community relations; Planning and budgeting; SHFG expenditure; Mobilisation of new members; Choice and procurement of pesticides and insecticides; Weeding and spraying of crops and animals; Harvesting of crop produce as well as Produce processing.

5.3.1. Incidence of empowerment through decision-making

In the study, “incidence of empowerment” is described as a consequence of membership to SHFG which is felt by individual members; table 1 presents results regarding the incidence of empowerment by taking part in key SHFG activities. The outcomes expose that participants felt total empowerment in only one aspect “harvesting of crop produce” (100%); this is followed by identification and selection of agricultural inputs for members’ gardens” (91.7%) and weeding and spraying of crops and animals (91.7%). All other selected aspects of empowerment scored below 90.0%; in three of the aspects, participants felt least empowerment (scoring below 40.0%), namely: choice and procurement of pesticides and insecticides (33.3%), SHFG expenditure (25.0%), and nurturing of SHFG – community relations (25.0%). From table 1, the overall averages for empowered and not empowered participants were 68.9% and 31.1% respectively.

Table 1. Incidence of Empowerment through Decision-Making in the SHFGs (n=12)

<i>Decisions regarding these aspects</i>	<i>Empowered</i>	<i>Not empowered</i>
Identification and selection of agricultural inputs	11 (91.7%)	01 (8.3%)
Control of pests and diseases	07 (58.3%)	05 (41.7%)
Mobilisation of members for SHFG activity	08 (66.7%)	04 (33.3%)
Nurturing of SHFG – community relations	03 (25.0%)	09 (75.0%)
Planning and budgeting	05 (41.7%)	07 (58.3%)
SHFG expenditure	03 (25.0%)	09 (75.0%)
Mobilisation of new members	07 (58.3%)	05 (41.7%)
Choice and procurement of pesticides and insecticides	04 (33.3%)	08 (66.7%)
Weeding and spraying of crops and animals	11 (91.7%)	01 (8.3%)
Harvesting of crop produce	12 (100.0%)	00 (0.0%)
Produce processing	10 (83.3%)	02 (16.7%)
Overall average	8.27(68.9%)	3.73(31.1%)

Source: Primary data, 2017

Table 1 further demonstrates that 7 out of 11 aspects scored above 50% with a cohort average of 11.1 while the remaining 4 aspects generated 3.75. The outcomes generated an overall score of 68.9% and 31.1% for empowerment and non empowerment respectively for individual SHFG members. This suggests that participants indicated a high prevalence of empowerment through decision-making in selected aspects. From the outcomes, it can be noted that “harvesting of crop produce” (100%) is the aspect where respondents consider being most empowered while “nurturing of SHFG – community relations” and “SHFG expenditure” are the aspects where they consider least empowered (25.0%). This reveals that external relations as well as planning and budgeting are made at the SHFG executive level and that is why SHFG members reported them as the aspects in which they have the lowest perceived empowerment in terms of decision-making. The outcomes suggest that an individual SHFG member has more prospects for empowerment through decision making and with that empowerment an individual can make use of the available prospect. Since the outcomes reveal that there is 68.9% empowerment for decision-making at individual level, it is upon the individual member to make use of the available option.

5.3.2. Incidence of empowerment through inter-personal action

The participants were tasked to describe the incidence of empowerment through inter-personal action in the SHFG; table 2 presents the outcomes. It was exposed that participants experienced absolute empowerment in the aspect “harvesting of crop produce” (100%) followed by produce processing (91.7%). However, all the remaining selected aspects of empowerment scored between 83.3% (for both identification and selection of agricultural inputs of members’ gardens as well as produce processing) and 58.3% (for planning and budgeting as well as nurturing of SHFG-community relations). From table 1, the general averages for empowered and not empowered participants were 75.8%% and 24.2% respectively.

Table 2 further reveals that 8 out of 11 aspects scored above 70% with a cluster mean of 8.9 while the residual 3 aspects for non-empowerment yielded 2.1. The outcomes generated an overall score of 75.8% and 24.2% for empowerment and non empowerment respectively for inter-personal action among members in the

SHFGs. This reveals that participants designated a higher prevalence of empowerment through inter-personal action in majority of the aspects. From the outcomes, it can be revealed that “harvesting of crop produce” (100%) is the aspect where respondents regarded to be most empowered while in three aspects participants considered least empowered (58.3%). This gives an idea about the issues regarding planning and budgeting, mobilisation and community relations are still out-of-the-way for a number of SHFG even at inter-personal action. The outcomes demonstrate that at inter-personal action level, members to the SHFG experience a higher prevalence of empowerment and with that experience individuals can exploit empowerment through inter-personal action rather than individual decision-making. Since the outcomes reveal that there is 75.8% incidence of empowerment at inter-personal action level, individual members need to refocus their energies towards intra-group actions.

Table 2. Incidence of Empowerment through Inter-Personal Action in the SHFGs (n=12)

<i>Experience in these aspects</i>	<i>Empowered</i>	<i>Not empowered</i>
Identification and selection of agricultural inputs	10 (83.3%)	02 (16.7%)
Control of pests and diseases	09 (75.0%)	03 (25.0%)
Mobilisation of members for SHFG activity	10 (83.3%)	02 (16.7%)
Nurturing of SHFG – community relations	07 (58.3%)	05 (41.7%)
Planning and budgeting	07 (58.3%)	05 (41.7%)
SHFG expenditure	08 (66.7%)	04 (33.3%)
Mobilisation of new members	07 (58.3%)	05 (41.7%)
Choice and procurement of pesticides and insecticides	09 (75.0%)	03 (25.0%)
Weeding and spraying of crops and animals	10 (83.3%)	02 (16.7%)
Harvesting of crop produce	12 (100.0%)	00 (00.0%)
Produce processing	11 (91.7%)	01 (8.3%)
Overall average	9.1(75.8%)	2.9(24.2%)

Source: Primary data, 2017

5.3.3. Incidence of empowerment through group action

The participants were tasked to describe the prevalence of empowerment through group action in the SHFG; accordingly table 2 presents the outcomes. It was revealed that participants experienced absolute prevalence of empowerment in the two aspects “weeding and spraying of crops and animals” as well as “harvesting of crop produce”; this is followed by “control of pests and diseases” (83.4%). All other selected aspects of empowerment scored below 70%; in two of the aspects, participants felt most disempowered (scoring over 80.0%), namely: nurturing of SHFG-community relations (83.4%) and SHFG expenditure (83.4%). From table 3, the overall averages for empowered and not empowered participants were 54.5% and 45.5% respectively.

Table 3 further demonstrates that in 6 out of 11 aspects where participated experienced empowerment, generated scores 50% and above with a cohort average of 9.2 (76.4%) while the remaining 5 aspects generated 3.4 (28.3%). This suggests that participants indicated a moderate prevalence of empowerment through group action in selected aspects. The outcomes demonstrate that “weeding and spraying of crops and animals” as well as “harvesting of crop produce” are the aspects where respondents experienced the most empowerment while “nurturing of SHFG – community relations” and “SHFG expenditure” are the aspects where participants

felt most disempowered (83.4%). This reveals that external relations as well as expenditure are dominated by the executive members and that is why SHFG members reported them as the aspects in which they have experienced lowest empowerment in terms of group action. The outcomes reveal that an individual SHFG member has moderate prospects for experiencing empowerment through group action and with that empowerment an individual cannot ably make use of the available prospects. Since the outcomes reveal that there is 54.4%% empowerment through group action, it is upon possible ways that the future of SHFGs in Hoima may not be bright unless group cohesion is enhanced.

Table 3. Incidence of Empowerment through Group Action as an SHFG (n=12)

<i>Experience in these aspects</i>	<i>Empowered</i>	<i>Not empowered</i>
Identification and selection of agricultural inputs	08 (66.7%)	04 (33.3%)
Control of pests and diseases	10 (83.4%)	02 (16.6%)
Mobilisation of members for SHFG activity	06 (50.0%)	06 (50.0%)
Nurturing of SHFG – community relations	02 (16.6%)	10 (83.4%)
Planning and budgeting	04 (33.3%)	08 (66.7%)
SHFG expenditure	02 (16.6%)	10 (83.4%)
Mobilisation of new members	05 (41.7%)	07 (58.3%)
Choice and procurement of pesticides and insecticides	04 (33.3%)	08 (66.7%)
Weeding and spraying of crops and animals	12 (100%)	00 (00.0%)
Harvesting of crop produce	12 (100%)	00 (00.0%)
Produce processing	07 (58.3%)	05 (41.7%)
Overall average	6.5 (54.5%)	5.5 (45.5%)

Source: Primary data, 2017

6. Discussion of outcomes

What inference can be drawn from the outcomes regarding the contribution of SHFGs to empowering small-holder farmers in Hoima? And do these outcomes relate to available literature on SHFGs as one of the paths to empowerment? Preliminary outcomes demonstrate that SHFGs can contribute to empowerment of members in four of the ten areas, in particular, decisions on “mobilisation of members” and “procurement of farm inputs”. These outcomes reinforce the theoretical underpinning on empowerment. Members of SHFGs will have the prospect to take part in decisions about planning and finances, spending as well as purchase of key inputs. These findings do concur with academic views presented a decade ago such as Golbič (2007:270) that top-bottom approaches are not appropriate to programmes that aim to attain sustainable livelihoods. When probing for other aspects that can empower small-holder farmers, the situation becomes more intricate. Even if statistical analyses reduce the number of contra reasons, this study confirms how it is obvious to suggest that membership to SHFG may not be the only aspect for considering differences in how small-holder farmers perceive the incidence of empowerment through the SHFG.

The key aspect describing differences in the incidence of empowerment in terms of intra-personal, inter-personal and group action is “information”. While results reveal that participants have access to information regarding SHFG issues, they do not seem to have a balanced opportunity for taking part in SHFG affairs. The

value of information is in line with a number of academic insights on empowerment. In particular, Slusky and Partow-Navid (2014:5) weigh information against awareness, which is one of the main streams for influence since it is necessary to non-SHFG members as well.

On one hand, access to information is essential for empowerment in key aspects of the SHFG such as acquisition of inputs and marketing of produce. Recent studies (such as Van Der Berg, 2017:169) demonstrate that access to information not only builds the tradition of transparency but enhances awareness about the different environments of the organisation. Consequently, once SHFG members acquire this form of awareness, they improve their capacity to appreciate their input and how to advance the group. The case for SHFG members and non-SHFG members in Hoima is not different: if both groups gain access to information concerning various aspects of decision-making, inter-personal action and group action, they can be able to determine their role in attaining targets, and they can identify additional prospects for involvement.

On the other hand, farmers who cannot access information face dilemmas in identifying possible prospects provided that access to information has an influence on empowerment, this study reveals that more information leads to more active membership. As demonstrated by Datta and Singh (2017), an essential proposition in latest studies suggests that information empowers the member of a group to insist on accountability from bureaucrats responsible for service delivery in sectors such as community development. Nevertheless, other studies reveal that this condition is rare as a result calling for clarity about when access to information can generate individual action or group action. For example, a study by Xiong et al. (2016) reveal four major conditions that might influence whether information is used productively, namely:

- a. whether information is relevant and handy to consumers,
- b. whether consumers will desire to alter their actions due to the information,
- c. whether service providers are aware of actions of consumers, and
- d. Whether service providers will respond to the challenges identified.

Once the above conditions remain, more information cannot automatically contribute to empowerment. Regarding taking part in SHFG activities, it can be held that not all kinds of information will empower members to partake decision-making, intra-personal action and group action. For example, when SHFG members and non-SHFG members have low access to information about relevant policies, they may fail to identify with pertinent policies. As a result, even when an opportunity is accessible, making use of the available option so the available option can lead to a desired outcome becomes less-realistic. Nevertheless, farmers who identify with pertinent policies may not be able to influence them since a number of decisions are taken at the higher level rather than majority of the SHFG. Even at the SHFG level, it can be assumed that leaders may wish to make adjustments that are not supported by agricultural extension workers. So the support of extension workers is essential; even though information offers a superior ground for making adjustments. Back to the results of this study, males reported more empowerment than females, notwithstanding whether they were members of SHFGs. This outcome supports one of the previous studies on how females in Africa are less-privileged than males, in a number of socio-economic and political aspects (Nakazi et al., 2017). A female participant recounts the condition:

During an SHFG meeting, either my husband or I can be present, but, for decisions concerning our financial obligations; it is my husband to decide, as head. (Participant)

The condition of sustained male supremacy was often referred to during personal interviews and it suggests the persistence of male dominance in African societies. This is true albeit the formal course of action which aims to encourage fairness in the relationship between men and women or males and females. A previous study on local decision making in the NAADS program revealed gaps between official gender policies and actual participation of the two sexes. For example, women made up a majority of the participants in many farmers' fora and male participants often felt they were not proportionately represented on account of their sex but merely co-opted. This was confirmed by male participants that challenged women dominance on the basis on numbers yet more men have superior skills and competence and distrusted women's ability to sustain a number of issues devoid of the inclusion of men (Mwesigwa, 2007:23). These issues reveal the impression that local economic transformation cannot be attained when one sex remains a victim of inequity.

From the observations, it can be acknowledged that SHFGs in Hoima do not, in themselves, have an unconditional empowering function on members of the small-holder farming community. That is, SHFGs appear to offer more prospects for SHFG members than for non-SHFG members to have a say in affairs of agricultural production and marketing given that the results are not vague. A substitute reading is to launch an informal association between SHFG membership and access to information. Focusing to the sprouting idea that access to information leads to greater empowerment of SHFG members compared to non-SHFG members, it can be thought that access to information appears from two diverse springs: from SHFG members and from the peripheral social network of every SHFG member. The connection between SHFG membership and information suggests that SHFG members gain directly from information disseminated to them as members, either through recognised and informal SHFG meetings. Non-SHFG members cannot have exposure to comparable information. Consequently, connection between information and the peripheral system reveals how any SHFG member can obtain information through a variety of channels such as SHFG meetings, intra-SHFG visits, cell phone, and places of worship.

The study reveals that SHFG members experience extra empowerment than non-SHFG members. This finding suggests a link between access to information and SHFG membership. This is so in four aspects: (i) information about the SHFG expenditure, (ii) day by day operations, (iii) procurement of inputs, and (iv) information about the SHFG. Insofar as SHFG membership presents empowerment opportunities, it has an indispensable indirect contribution to agricultural output. This observation is in agreement with what Anigbogu et al. (2016) report in a review of literature on similar groups in Bernue state, Nigeria: aspects intended for SHFG members and extension workers to get together will be exposed as well as to essential information they would otherwise miss. Consequently, SHFG members become inspired to identify with the issues at hand and seek out for additional information. They will, in particular, meet on a regular basis as a SHFG.

From this view, it can be concluded that the SHFGs, that were studied, contribute to empowering their members due to accessibility to a number of opportunities such as decision-making, inter-personal action and group action. Yet, it can be acknowledged that shortage of influential and direct access to empowerment

opportunities for farmers who do not belong to SHFGs denies them essential information and lowers their net produce. At this point, however, the outcomes cannot suggest that non-SHFG members face greater challenges than SHFG members but that this conclusion is generated on the basis of the cohort that was surveyed. When contrasting SHFGs with other client committees such as Village Health Teams (VHTs), it can be noted that such committees endure with a number of avoidable challenges which frustrate their likelihood to become wheels of empowerment. They, instead, have a tendency to be remote-controlled from the top, both in how members are recruited and in who determines the list of items to be discussed. For example, sub-county officials will, a number of times, influence the choice of executive members to client committees and seek to avoid critical voices for expediency. Sub-county officials will, in addition, influence a number of activities they consider pertinent for the committee to deal with and they will endeavour to hold back issues perceived to be “controversial”. In this way, bureaucrats have a tendency to hold FG members “hostage” to the government system to a certain extent than allowing them be channels of communication that can inform government of the concerns and demands at grassroots.

7. Contribution of the study to practice

This study presents three essential contributions to the view of empowerment and SHFGs:

- a. In regard to the broad rhetoric on empowerment, the study reveals that we can gauge empowerment in terms of accessibility of opportunity for SHFs to participate in decision-making, inter-personal action and group action. The study suggests that the primary element of empowerment is the accessibility of opportunity to take part in each of the three aspects. This assumes that the process of gauging empowerment can be espoused in other essential sectors, such as education, health and community sanitation, where client committees are necessary.
- b. In regard to the expanding pragmatic literature on client committees, this study is an endeavour to bring about additional support to how such committees function in real life; it paints an image on the functioning of SHFGs in Hoima, as models of client committees and their success in empowering SHFs in the countryside grassroots community through decision-making, inter-personal action and group action.
- c. With regard to information, the study draws attention to the knot linking information to empowerment as well as how committees can empower SHFs provided that appropriate and usable information is presented for them to be able to adjust their actions and respond to the challenges they face. This aspect of SHFs’ function has not been given adequate consideration among academics. It is thought that the position of both women/females and men/males in SHFGs demands further reflection so as to expose how a culture of male dominance continues to impinge on empowerment of women and or girls.

The outcomes presented in this article are restricted to describing the amounts to which members of SHFGs make the most of accessible opportunity to take part in three aspects, namely; decision-making, inter-personal action and group action. Using a qualitative approach, the outcomes describe how much of the accessible opportunity is used or the incidence of empowerment in each of the three aspects illustrated in the study. This includes: identification and selection of agricultural inputs, control of pests and diseases, mobilisation of members for SHFG activity, nurturing of SHFGs – community relations, planning and budgeting, SHFG

expenditure, mobilisation of new members, choice and procurement of pesticides and insecticides, weeding and spraying of crops and animals, harvesting of crop produce as well as produce processing. Nonetheless, future studies can use the results in this article as preliminary points for further investigation into the extent to which accessible opportunities inform sustainable livelihoods of SHFG members and non-SHFG members.

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