LEARNING BRIEF: APOLOU RESILIENCE ACTION COMMITTEES

The Impact of Community Mobilization Approaches on the Sustainability of Local Governance Structures

AUGUST 2023

Despite experiencing relative peace and undergoing rapid social, political, ecological, and economic transition, Karamoja remains the most nutritionally vulnerable in Uganda according to recent projections. The effects of climate change have exacerbated food insecurity, with the delayed onset of the rainy season, pests, and disease affecting crop production. Poor harvests lead to competition for resources, such as water and pastures, and below average income earning.[1] Recurring cattle raids continue to disrupt livestock markets, further undermining local livelihoods and exacerbating security risks. Undernutrition remains a significant barrier to development.

Relatedly, both community-level and formal government structures in Karamoja have historically lacked the mandate and capacity to address food and nutrition insecurity. Historically, community

[1] Karamoja is the only region in Uganda where the majority of districts are classified as experiencing Crisis level acute food insecurity–meaning households experience high or above-usual acute malnutrition or are able to meet minimum food needs only by depleting essential livelihood assets or through crisis-coping strategies. The poorest households are likely to experience "emergency" classification. According to https://fews.net/east-africa/uganda, accessed August 2023.

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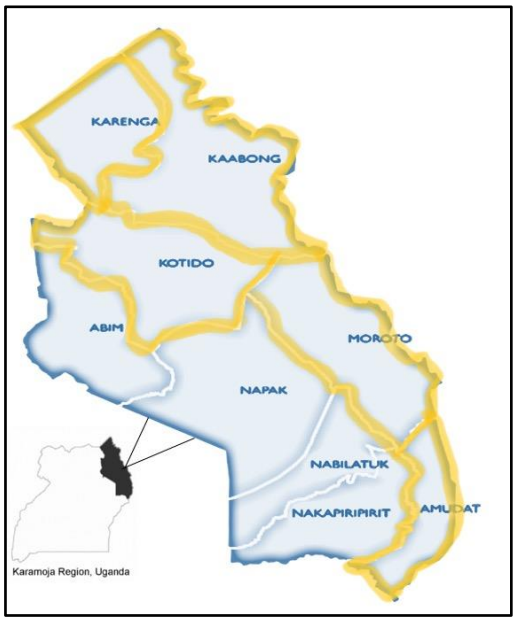
leaders rarely exercised their authority to participate in local government budgeting and planning or promote collective action on food and nutrition security issues. Girls, boys, men, and women did not fully engage in community-level governance and formal governance structures were notably unresponsive. Investments and interventions for improved food and nutrition security through these structures were often poorly coordinated.

Against this backdrop, Mercy Corps (MC) and a consortium of local and international partners implemented the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)/Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA)-funded Apolou program, starting in October 2017 and ending in September 2023. The program aim was to improve food and nutrition security through four interrelated outcomes across five districts (Amudat, Moroto, Kotido, Kaabong, and Karenga):

1. Inclusive and effective governance contributes to food and nutrition security;
2. Adolescent girls, pregnant/lactating women, and children under five are nutritionally secure;
3. Reduced incidences of WASH related diseases;
4. Improved livelihoods and income support household food security.



With the aim of contributing towards the first outcome, Apolou's governance programming was designed to draw heavily on MC's CATALYSE framework, an iterative and community-based approach that seeks to build local capacities to identify and organize around collective priorities, mobilize resources, implement projects, and influence leaders.

In line with this approach, the Apolou team formed 151 parish-level Resilience Action Committees (RACs) to undertake collective action initiatives on behalf of their communities and to hold duty bearers at the sub-county level accountable. Each RAC is composed of approximately 30 representatives nominated from the local villages, with a proportion of the group required to represent marginalized or underrepresented community members. Each RAC was composed of representatives of other existing community structures and groups formed to advance common interests of the community such as the health unit or school management committee, the Water User Committee, or farmers' groups.

From their inception, the RACs engaged heavily with their respective Parish Development Committees (PDC), a parish-level structure established under Uganda's Local Government Act of 1997, which were meant to identify local development opportunities and integrate them into parish development strategies for implementation by Parish Councils.[2] However, in many cases, the PDCs were either never formed or never effectively resourced.

In May 2021, Mercy Corps completed a Quality Sustainability Inquiry (QSI) to assess the likelihood of sustainability across Apolou's outcomes, which informed Apolou's Sustainability Exit Strategy. This strategy has been the focus of Mercy Corps' implementation during Apolou's final two years, including deliberate efforts to invest in the sustainability of the RACs. In February 2022, the Parish Development Model (PDM) was instituted by the Ugandan Government as a decentralization strategy to activate

[2] Government of Uganda (2003). Harmonised Participatory Planning Guide for Parishes/Wards. Ministry of Local Government. Kampala.

and empower the PDCs to organize and deliver public and private sector interventions for wealth creation and employment generation at the village level.[3] This initiative has created new opportunities for collaboration and integration between the RACs and PDCs, and for increased investment in RAC initiatives to address community-level priorities. However, it has also deepened risks of duplication of local-level governance structures–thus requiring thoughtful collaboration throughout the PDM's early implementaiton.

This Governance Learning Study explores the extent to which governance activities under Apolou supported the RACs to undertake collective action initiatives and hold duty bearers accountable, as well as the progress the RACs have made towards sustaining their role to address community needs. This research will help Mercy Corps, USAID/BHA, and development stakeholders in Uganda and related contexts to consider the types of activities that are effective, and makes recommendations for how implementers, government actors, and donors can provide the RACs or similar community-level structures with tailored support to further bolster their sustainability.

Methodology

The Governance Learning Study employed qualitative research methods for the collection of primary and secondary data, as follows:

- Document Review – The research team reviewed key program documents provided by the Apolou team. The **QSI** and resulting **Sustainability Exit Strategy** provided formative insight on the Apolou team's framework for assessing sustainability of the RACs in line with the core governance sub-objectives. The **Savings and Internal Lend Communities (SILC) Learning Brief** and **Outcome Harvesting** datasets and reports, both completed in 2023 by MC and in coordination with consortium partners, supported the triangulation of findings. The research team also reviewed **quarterly narrative reports** for additional insights on the progress of the RACs.

Table 1: Qualitative Data Sources

Data Type	Districts	Number of Sessions and Attendees
Participatory Data Collection	Amudat, Moroto, Kotido, Kaabong, Karenga	20 sessions, approximately 8 members per meeting
Focus Group Discussions	Amudat, Moroto, Kotido, Kaabong	6 sessions, approximately 8 members per discussion
Key Informant Interviews	Amudat, Moroto, Kotido, Kaabong	5 interviews with parish chiefs
	Moroto, Kotido, Kaabong	3 interviews with CSO representatives

- Participatory Data Collection Sessions – The research team designed a pilot participatory data collection tool aimed at gathering RAC member perspectives about their experiences over the lifespan of the program. The participatory tool included a series of interactive group exercises, designed to be conducted independently by the RACs. This approach sought to circumvent

[3] Government of Uganda (2022). Implementation Guidelines for the Parish Development Model. Ministry of Local Government. Kampala.

issues of physical access that would normally inhibit data collection in certain areas, such as physical distance from field offices, security challenges, and road conditions. It also enabled data collection at greater scale with minimal costs. Perhaps most meaningful, by trusting existing RAC members to "self-facilitate" the session, this approach helped create a safe space in which participants could speak openly about their experiences without researcher influence.

Twenty participatory data collection sessions (three to five per district) were completed. RACs were selected on the basis of their composition, feasibility of physical access, Quality Improvement and Verification Checklist[4] (QIVC) scores, and geographic spread – all in consultation with the program team and CSO partners. Each session targeted **eight members** from a single RAC, to ensure sufficient diversity in terms of age, gender, and relevant vulnerable groups to enable rich data, while keeping the group small enough to be manageable and ensure existing working relationships. Documentation resulting from the sessions included photos of flipcharts and discussion notes.

The research team collected self-reported, quantitative sustainability scores against four factors (defined in the analysis section below), as well as qualitative explanations of those scores, from the RACs during these sessions.

- Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) – The research team also organized FGDs with RAC members to complement and validate the information gathered through the participatory data collection sessions. A total of **six FGDs** were held in four of the five program districts. RACs were again selected based on their composition, physical accessibility, QIVC scores, and geographic spread, with different RACs participating to those selected for the participatory data collection sessions. Each FGD was composed of approximately **eight RAC members** from a single RAC, representing a diversity of participants, including members of vulnerable groups and the RAC's chairperson and/or secretary.
- Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) – To triangulate information about perceptions, collaboration with, and effectiveness of the RACs, the research team conducted interviews with **five parish chiefs,** representing the same parishes as the RACs involved in the FGDs, and representatives from the **three CSO partners** (KAPDA, NAWOA**,** and Riam Riam), who covered all program areas.

Analysis

The research team adopted a mixed methods approach for this analysis, particularly on data emerging from the participatory data collection sessions related to the sustainability of the RACs. In line with the QSI process, the research team utilized the sustainability framework outlined by the 2015 evaluation of four global Food for Peace programs, conducted by FHI 360/Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance III Project (FANTA). This evaluation suggested that three factors of Resources, Capacities, and Motivations were essential to sustainability, and noted that a fourth factor, Linkages, was often critical.

[4] The QIVC is a program management and monitoring tool utilized by MC and CSO partners to periodically assess the composition, functionality, and likely sustainability of the RACs, based on a series of standardized measures. This tool is meant to guide conversations with the RACs about their existing gaps and to inform decisions about how to support them.

The study found that "no project in this study achieved sustainability without all three of them in place before the end of the project."[5] These factors are further defined below:

Resources	Sustained source of funds or in-kind contributions
Capacities	Technical and managerial skills to perform core functions
Motivations	Tangible or intangible incentives that inspire engagement
Linkages	Vertical relationships with government and/or other entities that can augment the other three factors

Qualitative insights captured during the FGDs and KIIs complemented self-reported sustainability scores from the participatory data collection process. This data lent itself to a mixed methods analytical approach and also allowed the research team to compare the self-reported scores with the most recent QIVC sustainability scores collected by the program team in the first quarter of 2023.

Limitations

Sampling. The sampling methodology sought to account for physical accessibility in the selection of RACs included in the study. However, up-to-date information on insecurity and infrastructure across the sub-region demanded that the research team shift from the initial sampling plan, as Mercy Corps and the CSO partners could not guarantee safe or efficient transit to certain areas for the KIIs, FGDs, or observation of the participatory data collection sessions. Moreover, due to the distance and the time available for in-person data collection, the research team was unable to conduct FGDs or KIIs within Karenga. RACs located in the most insecure or rural areas are likely to have unique experiences that may not be fully reflected in this report.

Similarly, the original sampling plan stipulated that only RACs with at least three members with English literacy skills would be considered for the participatory data collection sessions. This criterion was introduced since data analysis was conducted by researchers without local language skills, and time and budget did not allow for translation of documentation from local languages into English. However, the program team and CSO partners suggested that some of the initially selected RACs might still face challenges completing the exercises as intended, because their English literacy skills were not sufficient to produce quality data. These RACs were replaced by others with similar QIVC scores, but exact matches were not possible. Thus, the final list of selected RACs lacked the full geographic spread and diversity of functionality and sustainability levels (according to the QIVC scores) that was initially intended.

Data Quality. The extended period of engagement covered under this study involves the entire length of the six-year Apolou programming, meant the RACs were unable to fully recall activities conducted during the earlier stages of the activity. This was particularly true regarding details about RAC formation, initial CATALYSE trainings, and early stage community consultations. This limitation made it difficult to assess which specific governance activities had contributed to current levels of sustainability, although more recent refresher trainings on governance and learning-by-doing activities remained salient to RAC members.

[5] Rogers, B. and Coates, J. (2015). Sustaining Development: A Synthesis of Results from a Four-Country Study of Sustainability and Exit Strategies among Development Food Assistance Projects. Washington, DC: FHI 360/Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance III Project (FANTA).

In some cases, parish chiefs attended the FGDs. While this tended to be in places where the RACs and parish chiefs had visibly strong working relationships, the chiefs' presence may have impacted the quality of responses from RAC members, due to the inherent power imbalances.

Documentation. The participatory data collection sessions were conducted remotely, without direct facilitation by the research team, and were documented through photographs of flipcharts and discussion notes. The research team coordinated with the Apolou program team to compile and promptly share this documentation after the sessions. However, the process faced delays across all districts, due ot blurry or missing photos and incomplete discussion notes. Data analysis was unable to proceed until documentation for each district was complete. To overcome this limitation, the research team provided examples of good quality photograph formatting and guidance notes to the field teams – a best practice that could be leveraged in the future to set clearer expectations for the use of the participatory data collection tool.

Findings

The following findings represent a synthesis of the data analysis across the key learning study research questions and have been grouped thematically.

CATALYSE and Layering of Governance Activities

Throughout the Apolou program, Mercy Corps and the CSO partners supported the RACs not only through core activities guided by the CATALYSE framework, but also through complementary activities meant to bolster the capacity and sustainability of the RACs.

Although the RACs were formed in multiple phases between 2018 – 2019, initial formation in all target parishes appeared to follow a consistent, four-step process:

1. Sub-county consultation meetings to identify existing community structures
2. Mobilization campaigns to introduce the concept of the RACs to communities and determine selection criteria for their inclusive membership
3. Election of RAC members by consensus or open voting
4. Formalization of the RAC and establishment of internal technical committees

Mercy Corps subsequently provided the newly formed RACs with training on the step-by-step CATALYSE process and related governance tools and topics. This included identification of community needs, group dynamics and inclusive community dialogue, establishing group constitutions, and collaboration with or advocacy to local government in ways that increase collaboration and mutual accountability between citizens and duty bearers. RAC members also received layered training on conflict management topics and negotiation, early warning and early response (EWER), conflict referral pathways to existing peace committees within their communities, and budgeting and planning. RACs were encouraged to develop action plans to actualize their different mandates. The majority of the RACs involved in this study specifically referenced the training on group dynamics as essential to their ability to effectively mobilize communities and identify their priorities. A number of respondents in FGDs referenced other foundational topics, such as advocacy, budgeting, and conflict resolution skills, as enabling them to achieve their mandate.

Throughout the majority of the Apolou program, RACs engaged in iterative community mobilization activities, such as resource mapping, collection of community priorities, monitoring of government services, and community dialogues. They developed action plans and implemented local development initiatives, such as sensitization campaigns on a range of topics, from education to gender-based violence (GBV) response, child protection, nutrition, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). Several RACs also intervened directly or conducted referrals in cases of GBV, child abuse, and child

labor. Many RACs engaged in direct dispute resolution in instances of land conflict or cattle raids and members were quick to describe specific experiences. Others mobilized community members to contribute user fees for the repair of inoperative boreholes. RAC members and parish chiefs involved in the FGDs and KIIs, respectively, felt that WASH and dispute resolution activities were particularly valuable to household and village-level wellbeing.

Integrated into these CATALYSE approaches, the Apolou program team layered in advocacy and budgeting activities. One of the core advocacy activities were *barazas*, also referred to as the program's accountability mechanism. A *baraza* is a uniquely East African model of public gathering to share information, collaboratively solve problems, and hold duty bearers accountable at the village level. RACs consistently participated in barazas as a key space to advocate for and elevate community needs to leaders and receive feedback on ongoing government service delivery efforts. The RACs also received training on local government planning and budgeting processes and developed community "wish lists" to prepare them for direct involvement in pre- and post-budget dialogues and budget conferences. Through these activities, the RACs sought to ensure that community priorities were resourced within the scope of available government funds and that any variances from agreed allocations were understood by the RACs and broader communities.

Finally, Mercy Corps included activities aimed at bolstering the sustainability of the RACs, focusing on their ability to access resources after the closure of the Apolou program. Notably, Mercy Corps supported the RACs to participate in informal savings groups, which were being implemented as a separate component of the Apolou program. These groups enabled members to save frequently in small amounts and to access credit on flexible terms. The groups were also linked to formal financial service providers, such as digital banking platforms. Once the PDM initiative was established, the RACs were also encouraged to register as community groups at the parish and sub-country levels in order to ensure their eligibility to apply for PDM grants as they became available in the sub-region.

Effectiveness of Layering. The experience of engaging in diverse, complementary activities appeared to deepen both the effectiveness and credibility of the RACs as local structures capable of positively influencing service delivery, development, and conflict management within their communities. RACs in Amudat, Moroto, and Kotido viewed budget conferences as a key forum in which to advocate for the needs of vulnerable groups and the broader community. For example, members from Moroto noted that priority requests for infrastructure, such as road repairs and extensions to better link villages to markets, would not have happened without their participation in these public forums. RACs in Amudat also viewed the wish lists as a critical mechanism for advocating on behalf of vulnerable groups. These activities enabled the RACs to fulfill one of their core functions of elevating community priorities and then holding duty bearers accountable.

One of the RACs in Kaabong also suggested that involvement in the budget conferences helped build their confidence to participate in government processes, which once appeared highly complex to participants. They cited this confidence as evidence of their improved advocacy capacity, which they expect to enable their ongoing sustainability. A RAC in Moroto also noted that they were able to better track budgets and service improvement plans that government officials had committed to, having been imbued with the knowledge and skills to keep track of implementation once budgets were approved and intervene in the event that plans were not followed as designed.

RAC members reported believing that their efforts across diverse functions and areas of public interest increased their visibility in the community, lending greater legitimacy to the RACs in the eyes of other community members. As indicated by a RAC in Amudat, RACs are deemed to be successful when "they are visible, consistent, and credible to both the government and other people."

While informal savings and lending activities were not perceived as a core function of the RACs, in some cases they served as important resources for community mobilization and advocacy activities,

covering the cost of refreshments for participants and transport of RAC members to activities. RACs in Moroto and Kotido shared that the Savings and Internal Lending (SILC) activities were part of what had bonded their groups together and incentivized them to continue meeting on a regular basis, and that they had outlined this commitment in their group constitutions. However, the current level of savings is largely viewed as insufficient to continue their activities as a RAC.

RACs in Kaabong were particularly focused on the potential of savings activities to support their group's sustainability and goal of continuing to advocate on behalf of the community. Yet they highlighed that they have savings boxes, accounting books, and knowledge, but lack funds. A RAC in Karenga suggested that their group's savings are only sufficient to cover advocacy, but not community mobilization activities. As intended under SILC, many RACs have therefore chosen to save for personal and household expenditures rather than to support RAC activities. One RAC in Moroto asserted that there was never an intention to save for RAC activities, though they were motivated to seek other resources to fund advocacy and community mobilization and valued the SILC activities as a further reason to keep coming together as a group.

While RACs involved in the study across every district noted that they had registered as community groups or community-based organizations (CBOs) at the parish and sub-county levels, only those in Kaabong, Karenga, and Kotido specifically mentioned the potential value of registration to access PDM grants as a means of accessing funds to support their long-term sustainability. Among some RACs, the establishment of referral pathways for GBV cases also institutionalized structures that may support the sustainability of the RACs.

Relationships between RACs and Communities

RACs maintained largely positive relationships with their respective communities, based primarily on their commitment to consistent and candid communication and collaboration. Iterative cycles of community consultation, dialogue, and feedback sessions created opportunities for regular exchange between RACs and broader community members. These interactions not only enabled the RACs to identify community priorities, but also shaped their value of transparency and the importance of two-way communication in generating legitimacy. RACs found success communicating in church meetings, at men's and women's groups, and informally in peer-to-peer spaces, such as while washing clothes, collecting water, working in community gardens during cultivation season, or on market days. RAC members in Moroto reflected on the value of both initiating activities to involve villagers, and creating space for villagers to approach them directly with their concerns.

RAC members highlighted that their new knowledge and skills on group dynamics and communication gleaned from Apolou trainings were formative to their effectiveness in engaging communities. RACs in Amudat and Kotido also stressed the value of working together with the wider community to identify strategies for broad engagement with one another and with government stakeholders. A number of RAC members who participated within the FGDs felt that they could be particularly strong advocates because they are also residents of the communities they represent.

Reliability was another key to establishing trusting relationships between the RACs and their respective communities. The RACs were able to build reputations for reliability by effectively elevating community needs to relevant government stakeholders and through the results of these advocacy efforts, especially visible infrastructure projects. According to a RAC in Kaabong, these successes not only fostered positive relationships between the RACs and their communities, but also generated appreciation from the community for their efforts and further motivated the RAC to continue their work. The Outcome Harvesting activity found, however, that there were some cases in which advocacy by the RACs led to intra- and inter-group tensions among RACs, due to perceptions of unfair allocation of grants and other resources or services provided.

Some RAC members also attributed their positive community relationships to their local dispute resolution efforts, whereby they have become recognized as trusted mediators on a range of issues, including GBV, land disputes, and minor disagreements within households or between neighbors. Aligned with the value of layered activities, they cited specific technical skills that they learned through the Apolou program as critical to their ability to mediate objectively and produce accepted resolutions without having to elevate disputes to higher-level authorities or security actors. Noteable skills, aligned with community engagement and food security goals, include how to measure an acre or how to diagnose animal and crop diseases.

Two of the RACs in Moroto indicated that their community was initially suspicious about their intentions and if they were being financially compensated as a RAC member, even perceiving some members as government spies. This created tension and demotivated the RAC. However, these tensions reportedly dissipated over time, as the RACs became more visible and saw results from their engagement. Several RACs in Kotido and Kaabong noted feeling that the lack of uniforms and identification cards inhibited their credibility in the eyes of the community members. In some cases, these perceptions shifted as the groups became recognized for their work over time. Still, the Apolou team engaged in discussions with the RACs on numerous occasions about whether or not to provide them with uniforms and identification cards. Based on previous incidents in which local peace committees had been perceived as 'spies' by community members or even targeted by armed assailants due to their perceived affiliation with the government or program activities, the Apolou team felt that the provision of uniforms and identification cards for the RACs could risk similar mistrust or violence should they be branded under the project. However, the program team acknowledged that the RACs could choose to supply uniforms and identification cards for themselves in addition to "letting their work speak for itself."

Diversity and Inclusion. Inclusion of diverse vulnerable groups was built directly into the process of establishing the RACs. Initial consultations to identify existing community structures supported the inclusion of members from groups such as water usage, health, and peace committees within the RACs. Furthermore, mobilization campaigns effectively generated collective recognition of the role of diverse and traditionally marginalized groups in local governance and advocacy, and members were nominated by their peers accordingly. CSO partners facilitating the RAC formation process made special efforts to encourage women to serve in leadership roles and ensure the overall representativeness of the RACs from the start. One parish chief in Kotido noted that, before the establishment of the RAC in her area, there were very few community structures comprising women and men together. Now that this arrangement has become normalized and visible, and led to positive community-level impacts, she expects it to continue.

RAC members were keenly aware of the value of representation and made deliberate efforts to mobilize vulnerable and traditionally marginalized groups for dialogue sessions and community meetings. They maintained a value of respect and active listening, noting that these groups often suffer from limited opportunities for communication in public forums. The RACs, therefore, reflected on the ways they sought to create safe space so that the views and needs of vulnerable groups could be shared.

RACs viewed their regular activities – including service monitoring, community wish lists, lobbying efforts, budget conferences, and community dialogues – as effective approaches to identify, advocate for, and directly address the needs of vulnerable and traditionally marginalized groups. These inclusive and collective processes ensured that the needs of diverse groups were captured. RACs were particularly attentive to the needs of people living with disabilities (PLWDs), pregnant/lactating mothers (PLM), orphans, widows, and the elderly. Some RACs undertook tailored strategies to mobilize and involve vulnerable groups to participate in activities, such as home visits for PLMs or selecting accessible venues for PLWDs. Some activities, such as apiary projects in Amudat and Karenga, were

effective at reaching ethnic minorities – a group that was noted as having potential for more intentional targeting in future activities.

The RACs also undertook dedicated efforts to register vulnerable individuals to be prioritized for relevant government and NGO assistance, share information with vulnerable individuals about available services, and conduct referrals to ensure their access to appropriate benefits. For example RACs effectively advocated for PLWDs to access assistive technologies and conducted awareness campaigns on the availability of mother's groups and family health services within their communities, in complement to outreach about household-level involvement in the PDM.

Relationships between RACs and Local Government

Relationships between RACs and local government officials varied across and within districts, with some RACs asserting that relationships had improved considerably throughout the Apolou, while others still felt that their interactions were limited and strained.

Overall, the RACs felt the relationships were increasingly collaborative and mutually respectful. They directly attributed these changes to the increased frequency and quality of interactions, including through barazas and dialogues, as well as joint monitoring, planning, and budgeting, which constitute the core CATALYSE approach and layered advocacy activities. The RACs highlighted the particular importance of the local councils and councilors at the village (LC1) and parish (LC2) levels, as well as the parish chiefs in attending these activities to listen to community grievances and needs, submit them for consideration to higher level authorities at the sub-county or district, and lobby for response.

RACs in Amudat and Karenga appeared to hold the most strongly positive views about their relationships with their respective government authorities, with one RAC in Amudat noting that a joint training between RAC members and sub-county government officials had been a key factor in building their relationship. A RAC in Kotido also expressed that they maintained a very strong relationship with their parish chief, meeting regularly to update one another on their activities and identify areas for collaboration. However, some RACs in Kotido held especially negative views about formal authorities, perceiving local officials as corrupt, lazy, inaccessible, and lacking professionalism. These RACs noted that they have had very few interactions with local government and viewed their parish and sub-county officials as gatekeepers, responsible for diverting assistance to other areas. In two extreme cases, one of the RACs in Kotido suggested that they still did not know who their parish chief was, and another did not have the contact details to communicate with the relevant stakeholders.

Yet, in the majority of cases, government officials also recognized the benefits of partnering with communities and how the community can assist them to do their work more effectively, resulting in their outward appreciation of the RACs' efforts. In one case in Amudat, the PDC directly supported members of the RAC to register for a PDM grant in order to continue their initiatives. In Amudat, a parish chief reflected that information on infrastructure challenges were typically communicated to RAC members first via the community, who then elevated the information to the appropriate authorities, increasing communication flows and overall efficiency. RAC members in Moroto noted that they have become the "first choice" for government officials seeking information on community needs and experiences, since they are now well established and have positive reputations for effectively mobilizing community members. These communication takes place through both in person meetings and mobile channels.

Parish chiefs also reflected on positive social changes within communities, which they attribute to the RACs. A parish chief in Moroto observed that community mobilization efforts by the RACs led to reduced alcohol use, increased collaboration between men and women on household and village-level activities, and improvements in school enrollment and village sanitation. RACs across all FGDs highlighted reductions in GBV, while RAC members in Amudat also noted additional positive and

visible changes in gender dynamics, such as husbands escorting their wives to health appointments and engaging in shared household labor. The RAC members reported sensitizing community members on the value of such behaviors and often modeled them for others, with some members reflecting on changing their own practices as they began to identify themselves as more visible role models.

Increased community awareness of government programs and initiatives has also been essential in building confidence between the RACs, local communities, and government officials. RACs in Kaabong and Karenga conducted dedicated sensitization campaigns on available government programs, and a RAC in Amudat noted that improved awareness of government programs was one of the keys to the overall strengthening of the relationship. In the course of their lobbying efforts, the RACs regularly provided progress updates to their communities through information sharing meetings, often attended by parish-level government officials. RACs and government officials also convened post-budget dialogues to validate that resources were allocated to respond to community needs. These various feedback loops, along with visible improvements in infrastructure, have fostered mutual confidence. Nonetheless, multiple RACs emphasized that while government officials may indicate support for community initiatives, many fail to deliver funding on the promised timeline, which undermines public trust. One example of this is the PDM, which has rolled out more slowly in Karamoja than in other counties in Uganda due to a number of constraints.

Across most districts, the RACs emphasized the poor state of their relationships with security actors, especially the police and army, due to perceptions of violent harassment of civilians by the army and bribery by the police. For example, in Kaabong, RAC members recalled an incident of having to negotiate with police to free wrongfully arrested people during a period of disarmament. In at least one area in Kaabong where security risks have increased since the start of the program, RAC members advocated to the district council for increased police presence, but were frustrated that while police stations had been constructed, personnel had not yet been deployed.

Interestingly, in Moroto, the RACs consistently spoke of positive changes in their relationships with security actors, highlighting collaboration with the army to jointly respond to cattle raiding incidents, and engaging with the police to refer serious GBV cases to the formal justice system and manage land disputes. A KII respondent in Moroto suggested that a RAC-sponsored petition to confront police bribery had contributed to these changes. A RAC in Karenga also perceived that the police and army had been helpful in supporting their conflict monitoring and EWER efforts.

Accountability. In each target community, there are tangible examples of government investments in infrastructure, including construction and rehabilitation of roads, school facilities, health centers, and boreholes, that serve as visible reminders of successful advocacy campaigns to hold the government accountable for quality service delivery to communities. The direct involvement of the RACs in participatory and joint activities, such as the aforementioned barazas, dialogues, service monitoring, and budget conferences, have been critical to enabling these successes. In some cases, the RACs have also gained access to regular council meetings. Furthermore, a number of RAC members also serve as PDC members, facilitating ongoing communication between the two structures.

While the RACs spoke generally of trainings that they had received from Apolou program, the partner CSOs specified that they had conducted a dedicated training on accountability, which they believed had contributed to the RACs' advocacy successes. This training covered how to identify the appropriate duty bearers to handle each issue, create pathways for lobbying, and elevate issues that required higher levels of authority in order to achieve the desired response. During an FGD in Kaabong, RAC members shared that participation in sub-county meetings had motivated them to become active change agents in their communities, rather than waiting for change to happen or services to be delivered. RACs believed that knowledge of budgeting processes and timelines at various levels of government also enabled them to more effectively advocate for community needs.

Across all districts, the RACs described ongoing impediments in their relationships with local government and ability to effectively hold them accountable, highlighting the bureaucratic nature of government institutions and widespread culture of corruption, even if their relationships with individual officials have improved. Turnover of elected officials can also mean that strong relationships end up faltering. In Kaabong, for instance, a newly appointed parish chief was unable to reference RAC activities and reflected that she had minimal engagement with the local RAC. The RAC members noted having difficulty reaching her, and instead prioritized advocacy towards other levels of government, while relying on the Apolou team to elevate community priorities and share feedback about the chief's behavior to more senior government stakeholders.

A RAC in Kotido framed the issue in terms of the "reluctance" of the system to change, while one in Kaabong noted how internal political competition impeded implementation of government programs, citing the ongoing delays in the rollout of PDM grants as a key case. RACs in Amudat, Kaabong, and Kotido suggested that certain planning and budgeting processes remain top-down, without community input, and that they are either excluded from or not proactively invited to certain council meetings, due to a perception that parish and sub-county officials fear the involvement of community members in their business. RACs in Kaabong and Moroto also emphasized how the physical distance between the villages and sub-county officials impedes communication and delay response to community needs, noting that the biggest gap exists between the parish and sub-county levels.

In some cases, requests have been submitted, but funding has yet to be allocated or disbursed. Findings from the Outcome Harvesting reinforced this claim, noting the weak financial capacity of the government to respond to community needs. Many RACs highlighted the particular failure of the government to substantively respond to acute emergencies, such as violence and food insecurity, as well as persistent social challenges, such as illiteracy. Nonetheless, the RACs emphasized that in cases when their parish chiefs are not responsive, they are prepared to sustain pressure on officials or advocate to higher levels of government. Apolou program staff and CSO partners also believed that ongoing collaboration, including social and behavior change initiatives, is necessary to encourage local government officials to internalize responsiveness and accountability as part of their professional identities.

Integration with PDCs and PDM. As the PDM begins to gain momentum, there is space for deepening collaboration and integration between the RACs and PDCs, as well as risks of duplication. Similarly, there are new opportunities to increase investment in and sustainability of the RAC's efforts to address community-level priorities, as well as confusion about funding mechanisms and delays in funding distribution.

Notably, some RAC members have also been appointed as members of PDCs. FGDs and the Outcome Harvesting also found that some RAC members ran for political office or have been called upon by parish chiefs to provide input into policy making procedures and implementation of government initiatives. Meanwhile, the Outcome Harvesting noted a potential for duplication of roles and responsibilities between the PDCs and RACs, which risks creating tensions, noting that these will need to be deconflicted in order to support constructive relationships and effective coordination.

Most RAC members have also registered as CBOs at the parish and sub-county levels in order to be eligible for PDM grants and have subsequently applied for funding. RACs have been encouraged to use the skills that they gained throughout the Apolou program to access this new funding stream and mobilize others to apply to participate themselves However, the launch of the PDM program has been delayed, leading to frustration. Recent reports suggest that grant disbursements are expected throughout July. There is some variation, however, in how PDM funding is expected to be implemented and how the RACs are organized, which could lead to confusion. This may also mean that local officials encourage community members to engage with the emerging PDM structures, and may be less

responsive to the RACs. Or, it may mean that RAC members can represent multiple groups established under the PDM.

Sustainability of the RACs

In alignment with Apolou's sustainability framework, RACs involved in the participatory data collection sessions conducted a self-assessment exercise to rate themselves across each of the four sustainability measures (Resources, Capacities, Motivation, Linkages) for each of their two primary governance functions (community mobilization and advocacy).

RACs in Karenga rated themselves as much more likely (77%) on average to sustain their activities across both functions, relative to RACs in other districts. RACs in Moroto also rated themselves slightly more highly (66%) on average than those in Amudat (58%), Kaabong (59%), or Kotido (55%). Meanwhile, three of the five RACs assessed in Kotido rated themselves as 50% or less likely to be sustainable. Across the sampled RACs, the average sustainability score was 63%.

Interestingly, these results did not align with the RACs' most recent QIVC sustainability scores, despite evidence that the self-assessment and QIVC approaches were both comparable measures of the RACs' sustainability. Overall, the average sustainability score captured by the QIVC was 54%, with RACs in Amudat (67%) and in Kaabong (58%) receiving the highest sustainability scores. Kotido (48%) remained among the lowest scoring districts across both measures, despite Moroto scoring slightly lower on sustainability under QIVC (47%). Meanwhile, 15 of the 20 sampled RACs gave themselves equal or higher sustainability scores during the self-assessment exercise, averaging 21 points higher than their QIVC scores. In particular, RACs in Karenga and Moroto rated themselves much more highly than indicated by their QIVC scores, while those in other districts were largely consistent with their QIVC scores. Only three RACs rated themselves significantly lower during the self-assessment, averaging 42 points lower than their QIVC scores.

Resources. The RACs consistently rated themselves poorly in terms of resources, with only one RAC in Amudat indicating that they had sufficient resources to continue both community mobilization and advocacy functions, and one RAC in Karenga suggesting that they had sufficient resources to continue their advocacy efforts. As noted above, resources encompass whether or not RACs have a sustained source of funds or in-kind contributions to support their activities.

A number of RACs consistently focused on the lack of funds to continue their activities. The RACs in Moroto expressed particular concern about lack of resources to cover the vast geographical area, either to reach all villages for community mobilization activities or to travel to government offices for advocacy meetings. Requested resources include mobile airtime, gumboots for moving through areas with poor roads, fuel, a motorbike, and refreshments for community meeting attendees. A few RACs that participated in the FGDs expressed frustration at having not received additional funds for their community activities under the Apolou small grants program, despite understanding that their proposals did not meet the selection criteria and parameters, which prioritized initiatives contributing to improved food security and RAC sustainability.

Nonetheless, despite sharing their concerns related to funds, RACs across Amudat, Kaabong, Karenga, and Kotido identified several existing potential sources of funds, which relates to the linkages that are further discussed below. One RAC in Amudat reflected on its success writing proposals to local NGOs, leading to micro-projects to construct a local hospital and nursery school, attributing its successes to "learning how to ask." RACs in Kaabong were particularly focused on the potential of savings and lending activities to support their sustainability, highlighting that they have savings boxes, accounting books, and the necessary skills and knowledge, even if their savings are currently quite limited. Findings from the Outcome Harvesting validated this perspective, suggesting that the savings activities constituted one of the strongest incentives for sustainability. RACs in Kotido, Kaabong and

Karenga also recognized the pledged PDM grants as a means of accessing funds to support their long-term sustainability. The RACs in Kotido also suggested that, while they may be insufficient to meet all needs, they are aware of available resources within the parish that they can draw on, while those in Karenga noted that they can utilize some funds that they have earned through their farming activities and apiary project, which resulted from the Apolou program.

Capacities. The RACs consistently rated themselves highly in terms of capacities, with only one RAC in Kotido suggesting that they completely lacked capacity. The RACs cited their knowledge and skills of how to conduct community mobilization and outreach activities, dialogues, monitoring of government services, sensitization campaigns, advocacy, referrals, and proposal writing. Both a CSO partner in Moroto and RAC members in Amudat noted that RACs have also leveraged skills, such as proposal writing, to unlock investments from local NGOs. RAC members in Kaabong also suggested that involvement in the budget conferences helped build their confidence to participate in government processes, which once appeared highly complex. They cited this confidence as evidence of their advocacy capacity, which they expect to enable their ongoing sustainability. These findings were echoed by the Outcome Harvesting. The RACs in Kaabong indicated that they also had knowledge of savings and lending, although one RAC in Kaabong and one in Kotido felt that they lacked sufficient skills for proper financial management and record keeping related to their savings. RAC members in Moroto noted that they lacked the skills to engage some community members, namely those who lack education.

CSO partners and RAC members alike recognize that groups with the strongest leadership skills – including organizational skills and ability to manage interpersonal relationships – are likely to be the most sustainable. One CSO partner in Kotido noted that a RAC's success could be derailed by "personality issues," either between group members, which could lead to internal conflict, or between RACs and duty bearers, who may not value accountability and transparency.

Motivation. Levels of motivation were quite mixed in terms of rating within and across districts, except for Moroto, where all RACs rated themselves highly. RACs across all districts cited positive group dynamics and commitment of members and leadership as a key factor in their motivation, while RACs in Kaabong and Moroto also mentioned their internal policies and rules as keeping them engaged. In Kaabong, for instance, one RAC created an internal disciplinary committee that would mobilize in instances when RAC members were not representing group norms or leading by example. Similarly, RAC members in Kotido mentioned that upholding agreed standards, such as sitting together at the same time every week, using a visitor's book, or taking detailed meeting notes, enhanced internal accountability and, in turn, motivation.

Being able to resolve challenges themselves, without having to engage local government or security authorities, increased motivation and pride in their roles for several RACs. RACs in Amudat, Kaabong and Karenga emphasized that they felt a sense of pride that community voices were being heard, that their skills and perspectives were being recognized, and that their issues were being resolved, which motivated them to continue their activities. They also highlighted appreciation from the community and government stakeholders as a motivating factor, giving them a feeling of social value. A RAC chairperson in Amudat noted that community members began to provide the RACs with information on a more regular basis once they began to "admire" the actions that the RAC was taking. CSO representatives in both Kotido and Moroto perceived RACs as becoming more proactive once they fully recognized that accessing services from the government, and to some degree, from NGOs and development organizations, is something they have both the right and ability to do. In some cases, the capacities that RACs had acquired and linkages that they had established also generated motivation for the RACs.

Nonetheless, the RACs also encountered several demotivating factors. Their identity as RAC members was central to their sense of motivation; however, as previously noted, some of the RACs

in Kotido and Kaabong felt the lack of uniforms inhibited their credibility. Financial difficulties, lack of recognition by government stakeholders, and lack of government response to their efforts also undermined the RACs' motivation. One of the RACs in Moroto also indicated that their community was initially suspicious about their intentions and compensation, which created tension and demotivated the RAC.

Linkages. The RACs assessed the degree of the linkages that they had established to be somewhat mixed, with RACs in Karenga consistently rating themselves highly, while one RAC in Kotido and one in Moroto rated themselves as completely lacking the necessary relationships to continue either their community mobilization or advocacy activities. Most RACs were able to reference specific government officials, such as parish chiefs and local councils, as well as specific communication channels, such as reports, meetings, and lobbying visits, that enabled coordination with these actors. However, RACs in Kaabong and Moroto noted several challenges, emphasizing how the physical distance between the villages and sub-county officials impedes communication and delays responses to community needs. RACs in Kaabong raised concerns about postponed meetings and insufficient information sharing, while those in Moroto suggested that their relationships were not sufficiently substantive. One RAC in Moroto also noted that they lack confidence about the appropriate institution to address to respond to community needs.

In addition to these four measures, RACs in multiple districts noted that conflict and security risks can impede their ability to operate, inhibiting their movement throughout their respective parishes and access to government officials or mentorship from CSO partners. Similarly, CSO partner representatives in Moroto and RAC members in Amudat noted that some RAC members stepped back from their responsibilities due to economic migration and pastoralism or time consuming garden work.

Recommendations

As Apolou comes to a close after six years, stakeholders can leverage important lessons learned from the implementation of the RAC model across the five target districts in Karamoja.

State and Local Government

In light of ongoing decentralization processes, including the establishment of new parishes and launch of the PDM and distribution of funds, state and local government institutions and officials are central players in promoting good governance and community development. These actors should:

- **Ensure that newly appointed and elected officials recognize the value of engaging community structures** as a means of improving government responsiveness to community preferences and needs. New officials should be oriented to recognize participatory governance approaches as central to their roles as decision makers. They should also be informed about and introduced to existing community structures by their predecessor or those in other levels of government who have engaged with said structures in the past.
- **Consistently and proactively engage community structures and community members** in barazas, consultations, and other spaces for two-way exchange. These collaborative activities should include pre- and post-budget dialogues, budget conferences, and council meetings, so that community structures have direct pathways to integrate local priorities into planning and budgeting cycles.
- **Identify means of communicating and completing community mobilization activities and research with especially remote or hard-to-reach villages** to ensure their equal access to decision-making processes. This may require increased travel or innovative communication

channels, such as radio broadcasts and digital technologies, to share information about both government initiatives in a timely way and NGO activites.

NGOs and CSOs

Community structures frequently serve as a centerpiece of governance programming for a range of local and international NGOs and CSOs. In order to meaningfully contribute to the effectiveness and sustainability of these structures, NGOs and CSOs should:

- **Design or continue to implement programming with participatory governance approaches** that activate community structures to take ownership of community development activities. Programming should aim to not only empower local platforms, but also increase their diversity and representativeness with respect to gender, age, disability, and ethno-religious differences, in safe and conflict-sensitive ways. Be mindful of duplication, especially where quality and responsive participatory processes have already been established.

- **Layer complementary activities** that speak not only to foundational community mobilization and advocacy functions, but also to secondary skills, roles, and thematic areas of interest that may motivate community structures and bolster their credibility within communities. These secondary activities may include dispute resolution and negotiation training and small-scale livelihoods initiatives in alignment with the priorities of the community members involved with local-level structures.

- **Invest in institutionalization of community structures**, particularly on issues of their long-term resourcing. Despite the benefits of savings and lending approaches, user fees and government grants are likely to be more effective approaches to ensure that community structures have sufficient funding to continue their core activities. Registration of groups and establishment of Memoranda of Understanding with government institutions are likely to facilitate this process.

- **Include duty bearers, especially in the early stages of engagement with new community structures,** by modeling ways of working, including transparency and inclusivity, and investing in future sustainability, such as driving commitments to publicly and proactively inform community members about key moments to feed into policy making and implementation processes.

Donors and Global-Level Policymakers

Participatory governance and community mobilization activities have the potential to contribute to effective and inclusive development. Donors should continue supporting the testing and scaling of approaches such as the RAC model, with concerted attention to:

- **Continue supporting multi-year programs that seek to empower community structures through opportunities to put skill building into practice.** Funding cycles should account for the inherent barriers to access in these areas, while also valuing the time, space, and staff necessary to meaningfully shift behaviors and practices. This flexibility should consistently build in time throughout the project lifecycle to allow groups such as the RACs to establish community trust, such as through mediation and community dialogue, and grow in intrinsic motivation while also investing in resource mobilization pathways for future sustainability.

- **Invest in strengthening the capacity of decision-makers and duty bearers** to increase their responsiveness to community needs and accountability to principles of participatory governance, especially in the midst of increasing fragility and climate-related shocks. These

efforts should strategically link government officials directly and with regularity to community platforms to promote institutionalization of participatory governance practices.

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