Savings Groups, Women's Empowerment and Community Development: Evidence from USAID-Supported Village Savings and Loan Associations in Awka North, Anambra State, Nigeria

Nwadiuto, N. L[1]., Ndifreke, S. Umo-Udo[2] & Edemidiong, E. Edemekong[3]
[1,3]Department of Public Administration, University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria
[2]Department of Political Science, University of Uyo, Nigeria
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Abstract
Purpose. *Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) are promoted worldwide as low-cost, self-managed instruments of financial inclusion for rural women, yet evidence from Nigeria remains thin, and little is known about whether donor-initiated groups can outlive project cycles. This study examines how participation in USAID-supported VSLAs relates to household conditions, access to savings and credit for enterprise, community solidarity, and prospects for sustainability in Awka North Local Government Area (LGA), Anambra State.*
Methods. *A descriptive cross-sectional survey was conducted using a multi-stage sampling design (stratification by clan, purposive selection of 16 villages, random selection of 48 VSLAs). A structured questionnaire (test–retest reliability r = .81) was administered to 384 women, yielding 358 valid responses (93.2%). Data were analysed with descriptive statistics and chi-square tests of association with Cramér's V as the effect-size measure.*
Findings. *Most members reported confidence in saving with their group (85.5%), saving more than before joining (70.9%), and having access to loans (75.7%, against 41.9% who had access to emergency credit before joining). Nearly two-thirds (64.5%) reported combined gains in food security, health and education. Perceived household improvement ($\chi^2(3) = 15.19$, $p = .002$, $V = .21$) and enterprise-related access to savings and loans ($\chi^2(3) = 21.26$, $p < .001$, $V = .24$) varied significantly across clans, whereas perceived solidarity did not ($\chi^2(3) = 6.26$, $p = .10$, $V = .13$). All respondents reported group involvement in community projects and plans to continue after donor close-out.*
Originality and implications. *The study provides rare evidence on donor-supported savings groups in south-eastern Nigeria and shows that outcomes are uneven within a single LGA. Programme design should attend to locally variable constraints, build linkages to formal finance, and invest in group-level governance to secure post-project sustainability.*

Keywords: *village savings and loan associations; women's empowerment; financial inclusion; community development; sustainable livelihoods; Nigeria*

1. Introduction

Financial exclusion remains one of the most persistent barriers to poverty reduction. The 2017 Global Findex database estimated that roughly 1.7 billion adults still lacked an account at a financial institution or mobile money provider, with women, rural residents and low-income households over-represented among them (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2018). Nigeria exemplifies the

problem: a 2018 estimate placed it as the country with the largest number of people living in extreme poverty (World Poverty Clock, 2018), and rural women, who frequently lack collateral, formal employment and secure land tenure, are among the least served by banks and microfinance institutions (Kapitsa, 2008; World Bank, 2007). Formal providers often impose minimum balances, charges and documentation requirements that low-income savers cannot meet, and the cost of reaching sparsely populated areas discourages expansion (Allen, 2006; CARE, 2012).

In response, development agencies have increasingly promoted community-based savings groups. The Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) model, first developed by CARE in Niger in 1991, has become the most widely replicated form (Allen & Panetta, 2010). A VSLA is a self-selected group of roughly 10 to 30 members who save through the purchase of shares at regular meetings, lend the accumulated pool to one another at interest, maintain a social fund for emergencies, and share out savings and earnings at the end of a cycle of about 9 to 12 months. External organisations supply training but no loan capital, so groups are self-managed and carry little operating cost (Allen, 2006; Hendricks & Chidiac, 2011). Because savings, rather than externally funded credit, are the foundation of the model, VSLAs are positioned as a route to asset building, consumption smoothing and risk management for people the formal system does not reach (Brannen, 2010; Gash, 2017).

Women's empowerment is a central, though contested, justification for these programmes. Empowerment is widely understood as the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices where that ability was previously denied (Kabeer, 1999), and it is integral to Sustainable Development Goal 5 and to the broader 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2015). Savings groups may contribute through income, asset accumulation, decision-making authority and social capital. Yet the empirical record is mixed. Randomised evaluations have found positive effects on savings, loan access and consumption smoothing, but modest or inconsistent effects on income, assets and women's decision-making (Beaman et al., 2014; Karlan et al., 2017; Ksoll et al., 2016), and scholars caution that women's participation in financial programmes does not automatically translate into empowerment and may even increase workloads or domestic tension (Johnson, 2004; Kabeer, 2005).

Three gaps motivate the present study. First, most rigorous evidence on VSLAs comes from East and West Africa outside Nigeria; studies of donor-supported groups in south-eastern Nigeria are scarce. Second, existing work seldom examines whether outcomes are uniform within a single administrative area, even though clans and communities differ in market access, social structure and group maturity. Third, programme sustainability, that is, whether groups and the community are prepared to continue after implementing partners withdraw, is routinely assumed rather than investigated (Hendricks & Chidiac, 2011).

This article addresses these gaps through a survey of women in VSLAs supported by two USAID implementing partners, the Association for Reproductive and Family Health (ARFH) and the Widows and Orphans Empowerment Organization (WOEO), in Awka North LGA, Anambra State. Specifically, it:

1. assesses whether members appreciate VSLA activities and perceive improvements in their households;
2. determines whether participation has expanded access to savings and loans for starting or growing businesses;
3. examines whether participation is associated with community solidarity; and
4. assesses the community's readiness to sustain VSLA activities beyond the project cycle.

Because every respondent is a VSLA member, the inferential component tests whether perceived outcomes are evenly distributed across the four clans of the LGA (see Section 3.6). The hypotheses are therefore stated as follows:

- **H1:** Perceived improvement in household conditions is independent of clan of residence.
- **H2:** Perceived increase in access to savings and loans for starting or growing a business is independent of clan of residence.
- **H3:** Perceived increase in community solidarity is independent of clan of residence.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 The VSLA model and its logic

VSLAs are accumulating savings and credit associations that require no external capital and are not formally registered, which allows simple record-keeping suited to members with limited literacy (Allen & Panetta, 2010). Groups elect a management committee, adopt a constitution, and secure funds in a lockable box whose three keys are held by different members, so that all transactions occur transparently in front of the membership (Allen & Staehle, 2007). Members buy between one and five shares per meeting at a share value fixed at the start of the cycle. Loans are priced and repaid on terms the group sets, and interest accrues to members rather than to an external lender. A separate social fund provides grants or interest-free loans for emergencies. The first cycle is a supervised training cycle of at least 36 weeks, after which groups operate independently (Allen & Staehle, 2007; Hendricks & Chidiac, 2011).

The model's advantages are well documented: very low start-up and operating cost, outreach to areas without bank branches, flexibility in saving and repayment, retention of interest within the community, and strong peer monitoring because members know one another (Allen, 2006; Brannen, 2010). Its limitations are equally recognised. Loan capital is bounded by members' saving capacity; product range is narrow without linkage to formal institutions; annual share-outs interrupt accumulation; and more powerful members may capture a disproportionate share of loans unless caps are enforced (Allen & Panetta, 2010; Gash, 2017).

2.2 Empirical evidence on savings groups

Evidence on savings groups comprises both experimental and observational work. A cluster-randomised trial in northern Mozambique found that VSLA access increased savings, access to credit and consumption smoothing, with benefits for household welfare (Ksoll et al., 2016). A multi-country randomised evaluation across Ghana, Malawi and Uganda reported improvements in financial inclusion, business activity and resilience, but only small changes in income and consumption (Karlan et al., 2017). In Mali, Beaman et al. (2014) found that savings groups increased access to small loans and reduced the sale of assets and food insecurity in lean periods, while average income effects were limited. Theoretical and empirical work on self-help groups in India further suggests that group-based finance can raise investment and income, although benefits depend on group quality and on the presence of external support (Greaney et al., 2016).

Studies of microfinance and women more broadly link access to credit with higher household income and improved coping in lean seasons (Mustafa et al., 1996; Remenyi & Quiñones, 2000; Zeller & Sharma, 1998), and with greater spending on children's nutrition and schooling when women control resources (Duflo, 2012; Grasmuck & Espinal, 2000). However, Kabeer (2005) and Johnson (2004) caution that these gains are conditional: women may serve as conduits for loans controlled by male relatives, face heavier workloads, or experience tension at home. Within Africa, programme-level studies attribute to VSLAs improvements in women's savings

discipline, emergency preparedness, enterprise capital and school-fee payment (Anyango et al., 2007; Brannen, 2010; Kesanta & André, 2015). Overall, the literature suggests that VSLAs reliably expand access to basic financial services, whereas broader empowerment outcomes are context-dependent, which argues for locally grounded evidence.

2.3 Empowerment, solidarity and sustainability

Empowerment has no single agreed definition and is difficult to measure because it is a process rather than a state (Malhotra et al., 2002). Kabeer (1999) identifies three interrelated dimensions: resources (access to and future claims on material and social assets), agency (the capacity to define goals and act on them), and achievements (the outcomes realised). Operational measures include participation in household decision-making, mobility, control over income, asset ownership and social capital (Anyango et al., 2007; Khan & Noreen, 2012; Weber & Ahmad, 2014). Economic empowerment, in this view, is a necessary but insufficient condition: increased access to economic resources creates opportunities that women may or may not convert into agency (Eyben et al., 2008).

Group membership also generates social capital. Regular meetings create a forum for information exchange, mutual assistance and collective action, and the social fund institutionalises solidarity by pooling risk (Cheston & Kuhn, 2002). Solidarity is therefore both a by-product and a condition of VSLA success, and its perception may reflect pre-existing community cohesion as much as programme effects.

Sustainability concerns whether groups can continue without external support. VSLA proponents argue that low operating cost, self-capitalisation, transparency and the welfare fund make groups durable, and that members may use them as a platform to access formal financial services (Allen, 2006; Hendricks & Chidiac, 2011). Whether communities actually plan for continuity after implementing partners withdraw has received little empirical attention, and this study contributes evidence on it.

2.4 Theoretical framework

The study draws on Empowerment Theory and the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA). Empowerment Theory conceives empowerment as a process by which individuals, organisations and communities gain mastery over their affairs and critical awareness of their social environment (Zimmerman, 2000). It emphasises that providing resources is insufficient unless people are equipped with the tools, skills and consciousness to use them (Ledwith, 2011). Applied here, VSLA membership supplies women with a structured arena for saving, borrowing, decision-making and leadership, which may build resources, agency and collective efficacy. A limitation of the theory is its generality, as it does not specify gender-specific mechanisms, a gap that Kabeer's (1999) resources–agency–achievements framework helps fill.

The SLA, developed by Chambers and Conway (1992) and elaborated by Scoones (1998), defines a livelihood as sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and not undermine the natural resource base. It directs attention to five asset categories (human, natural, physical, financial and social), to vulnerability contexts such as seasonality and shocks, and to the institutions and processes that mediate access to assets. For VSLAs, financial and social capital are the principal assets strengthened, and the social fund and savings serve as buffers against shocks. The SLA also provides a lens for assessing sustainability beyond the project cycle.

Rational Choice Theory (Scott, 2000) and Prospect Theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) were

considered because they explain how individuals weigh costs, benefits and risks when saving and borrowing, but they were not adopted as the organising framework because they centre on individual decision calculus rather than on empowerment as a collective and structural process. The study's conceptual model therefore links VSLA participation to (i) financial and social capital, (ii) household welfare and enterprise outcomes, (iii) community solidarity and (iv) institutional sustainability, with clan-level context as a source of variation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

A descriptive cross-sectional survey design was adopted. The design is appropriate for describing the nature and distribution of a phenomenon as it exists, without manipulating variables, and for collecting standardised data from a large number of respondents for statistical analysis (Bryman, 2016; Nwagbara, 2007; Okereke, 2008).

3.2 Study area

Awka North LGA is one of 21 LGAs in Anambra State, south-eastern Nigeria, and lies within the Anambra Central Senatorial District. It has a tropical climate with a dry season from November to March and a wet season from April to October, interrupted by a short dry spell in August; mean temperatures range from about 23°C to 31°C. The population is culturally homogeneous and is engaged predominantly in farming and trading, with a growing number in public-sector and other occupations. The LGA comprises four clans: Amansea (23 villages), Achalla (23 villages), Mgbakwu (14 villages) and Ebenebe (19 villages). It was selected because USAID, through ARFH and WOEO, has supported VSLA formation there with the cooperation of local stakeholders.

3.3 Population, sample size and sampling procedure

The study population comprised women aged 18 to 67 years resident in the LGA, with particular reference to members of USAID-supported VSLAs operating there at the time of the study. Sample size was determined using the standard formula for proportions (Godden, 2004):

$n = Z^2p(1 - p) / C^2 = (1.96)^2(0.5)(0.5) / (0.05)^2 = 384.16$

where $Z = 1.96$ (95% confidence), $p = 0.5$ (maximum variability) and $C = 0.05$ (margin of error). The conservative sample size was set at 384.

A multi-stage procedure was used. In stage one, the LGA's villages were stratified by the four clans. In stage two, four villages per clan with active VSLAs were purposively selected, giving 16 villages (Table 1). In stage three, the names of VSLAs in each selected village were written on slips and drawn at random, three groups per village (48 groups in all), and 24 women were drawn per village, giving 96 per clan and 384 in total.

Table 1. Sampling frame and selected villages

Clan	Villages in clan	Villages selected	Selected villages	Questionnaires administered
Amansea	23	4	Amaowelle, Egbeagu, Okikwa, Orebe	96
Achalla	23	4	Umudiani, Amukabia, Odawa, Udezu	96
Mgbakwu	14	4	Amankpu, Anawayi, Amaezike, Amede	96
Ebenebe	19	4	Uwuajana, Uwuji, Umiogbuefi, Umuoye	96

Clan	Villages in clan	Villages selected	Selected villages	Questionnaires administered
Total	**79**	**16**		**384**

3.4 Instrument, validity and reliability

Data were collected with a structured questionnaire in five sections: socio-demographic characteristics (Section A) and four sections corresponding to the study objectives (Sections B to E), covering household impact, access to savings and loans, solidarity and sustainability. Items were mainly closed-ended (yes/no and categorical options). Face and content validity were established by giving a draft to experts in sociology, political science, economics and the wider social sciences, whose comments were incorporated in the final version. Reliability was assessed by test–retest: the instrument was administered to 18 women (six in each of three villages outside the study area with similar characteristics) and re-administered after two weeks. Pearson's product-moment correlation between the two sets of scores was $r = .81$, indicating strong stability.

3.5 Data collection and ethics

Data were collected by the lead researcher and two research assistants trained for one day on research ethics, confidentiality, informed consent, questionnaire administration and data management. Letters of introduction were presented to village and VSLA leaders, who introduced the team to group members. Verbal informed consent was obtained from each participant. Respondents who were able completed the questionnaire themselves, while non-literate respondents were interviewed by a member of the team. Completion took 4 to 10 minutes, and fieldwork lasted six weeks. Questionnaires were numbered 1 to 384 to avoid duplication. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, informed that participation was voluntary and that the exercise was for academic purposes, and told that no harm was anticipated, although the process might be mildly stressful. *[Insert institutional ethical clearance reference, if applicable, and the fieldwork year.]*

3.6 Data analysis

Questionnaires were checked for completeness and consistency, coded and analysed quantitatively. Frequencies and percentages summarised respondent characteristics and responses. Chi-square tests of independence at the 5% level of significance ($\alpha = .05$) were used to test H1 to H3, using clan as the grouping variable ($df = 3$ for each 4×2 table), and Cramér's V was computed as an effect-size measure (conventionally, .10 small, .20 to .30 moderate). Because all respondents were VSLA members, the tests assess whether reported outcomes are homogeneous across clans; they do not compare members with non-members, and the results are interpreted accordingly.

4. Results

4.1 Response rate and respondent profile

Of 384 questionnaires distributed, 377 were returned and 19 were voided because of incomplete or improper completion, leaving 358 valid questionnaires and an effective response rate of 93.2% (Table 2). This is well above the 70% threshold commonly regarded as very good for survey research (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003).

Table 2. Questionnaire administration and response by clan

Clan	Administered	Retrieved	Voided	Valid
Amansea	96	96	3	93
Achalla	96	95	5	90
Mgbakwu	96	94	5	89
Ebenebe	96	92	6	86
Total	**384**	**377**	**19**	**358**

Table 3 summarises respondent characteristics. Respondents were in their economically active years (mean age 40.5 years), with the modal age group being 38 to 47 years (33.8%). Fewer than half (46.1%) were married, and 29.3% were divorced, separated or widowed, which indicates that many respondents were the main or sole providers in their households. Most had secondary (45.8%) or primary (29.3%) education, and 41.6% were self-employed. Household size was mostly 3 to 6 members (50.3%) or 7 to 10 members (46.1%). Respondents were overwhelmingly Christian (95.3%). Just over half (53.9%) had been VSLA members for 2 to 5 years and 34.1% for six years or more, so most had experienced at least one full saving cycle.

Table 3. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (N = 358)

Characteristic	*n*	%
Age (years)		
18–27	40	11.2
28–37	102	28.5
38–47	121	33.8
48–57	78	21.8
58–67	17	4.7
Marital status		
Single	88	24.6
Married	165	46.1
Divorced/separated	67	18.7
Widowed	38	10.6
Education		
No formal education	17	4.7
Primary	105	29.3
Secondary	164	45.8
Tertiary	72	20.1
Employment status		
Unemployed	133	37.2
Self-employed	149	41.6
Employed	76	21.2
Household size		
3–6 members	180	50.3
7–10 members	165	46.1
11–14 members	13	3.6
Length of VSLA membership		
Less than one year	43	12.0
2–5 years	193	53.9

Characteristic	*n*	%
6–9 years	94	26.3
10 years or more	28	7.8

Note. Mean age = 40.5 years. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

4.2 Savings behaviour and household outcomes

Before VSLAs were introduced, nearly half of respondents (46.4%) kept their savings at home, 24.3% used banks, 21.2% held savings in assets such as livestock or goods, and 8.1% did not save (Table 4). After joining, 70.9% reported saving more, 17.6% about the same and 11.5% less. A large majority (85.5%) expressed confidence in saving with their group, and 97.2% appreciated the introduction of VSLAs in their community.

On household impact, 64.5% reported improvements in food security, health care and education combined; a further 19.3%, 8.4% and 7.8% reported improvements in food security, education and health respectively. Nevertheless, when asked directly whether VSLA membership had improved their household conditions, 60.9% answered yes and 39.1% no, a more guarded verdict than the near-universal appreciation of the programme.

Table 4. Savings behaviour and household outcomes (N = 358)

Item and response	*n*	%
Where savings were kept before VSLA		
At home	166	46.4
In banks	87	24.3
In assets	76	21.2
Did not save	29	8.1
Savings compared with before joining		
Saved more	254	70.9
About the same	63	17.6
Saved less	41	11.5
Confidence in saving with VSLA		
Yes	306	85.5
No	52	14.5
Appreciates introduction of VSLA		
Yes	348	97.2
No	10	2.8
Main household impact		
Improved food security	69	19.3
Met basic health needs	28	7.8
Improved access to education	30	8.4
All of the above	231	64.5
VSLA improved household conditions		
Yes	218	60.9
No	140	39.1

4.3 Access to credit and enterprise development

Credit access was a clear area of change (Table 5). Before joining, 58.1% of respondents had no

access to credit in an emergency; after joining, 75.7% reported being able to obtain loans when needed. Two-thirds (66.2%) said VSLAs had increased their access to savings and loan options for starting or growing a business. Among respondents, 12.6% used loans to start a business, 24.6% to invest in an existing business, and 46.4% for a combination of enterprise and consumption purposes; only 8.9% used loans solely for consumption. Taken together, 83.6% used loans at least partly for business purposes, although 7.5% reported none of the listed uses.

Table 5. Access to credit and use of loans (N = 358)

Item and response	*n*	%
Access to emergency credit before joining		
Yes	150	41.9
No	208	58.1
Access to credit/loans as a member		
Yes	271	75.7
No	87	24.3
VSLA increased access to savings and loans for business		
Yes	237	66.2
No	121	33.8
Use of loans		
Start a business	45	12.6
Invest in an existing business	88	24.6
Consumption	32	8.9
All of the above	166	46.4
None of the above	27	7.5

4.4 Solidarity, voice and sustainability

Indicators of social cohesion were uniformly high (Table 6). Most respondents (72.6%) said their group showed concern for members' welfare beyond saving, 86.9% felt at ease contributing opinions at meetings, and 87.2% believed women's participation in VSLAs had increased community solidarity. Wider civic participation was also high: 91.6% had attended village or clan meetings in addition to VSLA meetings, which suggests that VSLA membership is embedded in, rather than substituting for, existing community structures. Group composition was socially homogeneous, with 94.4% reporting that members share a similar socio-economic background. All respondents reported that their groups were involved in community projects and that there were plans to sustain the groups beyond the close-out of USAID's implementing partners.

Table 6. Solidarity, participation and sustainability (N = 358)

Item	Yes *n* (%)	No *n* (%)
Group shows concern for members' welfare	260 (72.6)	98 (27.4)
Comfortable contributing opinions in VSLA meetings	311 (86.9)	47 (13.1)
Participated in village/clan meetings beyond VSLA	328 (91.6)	30 (8.4)
Women's VSLA participation increased community solidarity	312 (87.2)	46 (12.8)
Members share similar socio-economic background	338 (94.4)	20 (5.6)
Group involved in community projects	358 (100.0)	0 (0.0)

Item	Yes *n* (%)	No *n* (%)
Plan to sustain VSLAs beyond partner close-out	358 (100.0)	0 (0.0)

4.5 Tests of association by clan

Table 7 presents the distribution of key outcomes by clan together with the chi-square results. Expected frequencies exceeded 5 in all cells, satisfying the test's assumptions.

Table 7. Perceived outcomes by clan and chi-square tests (N = 358)

Outcome	Amansea (n = 93)	Achalla (n = 90)	Mgbakwu (n = 89)	Ebenebe (n = 86)	$\chi^2(3)$	p	Cramér's V
H1: Household conditions improved (% yes)	69.9	68.9	44.9	59.3	15.19	.002	.21
H2: Increased access to savings and loans for business (% yes)	64.5	73.3	48.3	79.1	21.26	< .001	.24
H3: Increased community solidarity (% yes)	87.1	80.0	91.0	90.7	6.26	.10	.13

Note. The 5% critical value for χ^2 with 3 degrees of freedom is 7.815.

H1. The calculated χ^2 of 15.19 exceeds the critical value of 7.815, so the null hypothesis was rejected: perceived improvement in household conditions differed significantly by clan (p = .002, V = .21). Respondents in Amansea (69.9%) and Achalla (68.9%) were most likely to report improvement, while those in Mgbakwu (44.9%) were least likely.

H2. The calculated χ^2 of 21.26 also exceeds the critical value, so the null hypothesis was rejected (p < .001, V = .24). Reported gains in business-related access to savings and loans were highest in Ebenebe (79.1%) and Achalla (73.3%) and lowest in Mgbakwu (48.3%).

H3. The calculated χ^2 of 6.26 is below the critical value, so the null hypothesis was retained: perceived solidarity did not differ significantly across clans (p = .10, V = .13). Solidarity was reported by a large majority in every clan (80.0% to 91.0%).

5. Discussion

5.1 Savings, credit and household welfare

The findings are consistent with the central claim of the VSLA literature that savings groups expand basic financial access for people the formal system does not serve. Most respondents had previously saved at home or in assets, which are insecure and illiquid, and most now report saving more with greater confidence in the safety of their funds. These results echo experimental and observational evidence of increased savings and improved consumption smoothing (Beaman et al., 2014; Karlan et al., 2017; Ksoll et al., 2016). The shift in emergency credit access from 41.9% to 75.7% is especially important in a setting of seasonal agriculture and informal trade, where shocks such as illness or crop loss can force asset sales (Allen & Panetta, 2010). The use of loans, with more than four in five respondents directing them at least partly to enterprise, indicates that VSLAs are functioning as a source of working capital for micro-enterprise, in line with earlier findings from Zanzibar and Tanzania (Anyango et al., 2007; Brannen, 2010; Kesanta & André, 2015).

The results on household welfare are more nuanced than the headline figures suggest. Almost all respondents appreciated VSLAs, and 64.5% reported combined benefits in food, health and education, yet only 60.9% affirmed that household conditions had improved. Appreciation of a programme is not equivalent to measurable welfare change, and the 39.1% who did not report improvement are a reminder that the benefits of savings groups are not automatic. This pattern accords with the broader microfinance literature, which finds that financial access translates into welfare gains conditionally, depending on how women use resources, on household dynamics and on market opportunities (Duflo, 2012; Johnson, 2004; Kabeer, 2005). It also reflects a recurring finding of the randomised studies: strong effects on financial behaviour, more modest effects on income and assets (Karlan et al., 2017).

5.2 Uneven outcomes across clans

The significant clan differences for household improvement and enterprise-related access (H1 and H2) are the study's most distinctive result. Mgbakwu clan stands out: fewer than half of respondents there reported improved household conditions (44.9%) or increased enterprise access (48.3%), compared with 59% to 79% elsewhere. The effect sizes are small to moderate, so the differences should not be overstated, but they are consistent and substantively meaningful. The survey did not collect data on the reasons, and any explanation is necessarily provisional. Plausible factors include differences in group maturity and governance, distance to markets and to other financial services, local economic structure, and the intensity of implementing-partner support. These are conditions that the SLA treats as part of the vulnerability context and the transforming structures that mediate whether financial assets convert into livelihood outcomes (Scoones, 1998). The result supports a practical point: treating an LGA as a homogeneous programme area can mask pockets in which the model underperforms, and monitoring should therefore be disaggregated below the LGA level.

The lack of a significant clan difference in perceived solidarity (H3) indicates a shared experience of cohesion. Two interpretations are possible. First, VSLA mechanisms, such as the social fund, collective rules and meetings in which all transactions are conducted openly, may reliably produce trust and mutual support (Allen & Staehle, 2007; Cheston & Kuhn, 2002). Second, solidarity may reflect pre-existing social cohesion in culturally homogeneous communities, where members already know one another and attend village and clan meetings (91.6%). Because the study has no non-member comparison or baseline, it cannot distinguish between these explanations. The very high share of respondents reporting a similar socio-economic background (94.4%) also implies that groups are largely bonding rather than bridging forms of social capital, which supports mutual insurance but may limit access to wider networks, information and markets.

5.3 Empowerment

The data provide indirect rather than direct evidence on empowerment. In Kabeer's (1999) terms, the findings speak most clearly to resources (savings, credit and enterprise capital) and, more tentatively, to agency (86.9% feel at ease expressing opinions in group meetings). That 91.6% already participate in village and clan meetings suggests that women in this setting may have had a degree of civic presence before VSLA membership, which cautions against attributing voice solely to the programme. No item measured control over loan use, household decision-making or asset ownership, so the study cannot show that increased resources have been converted into greater decision-making power. This limits the strength of empowerment claims and is consistent

with scholarly caution that financial participation is necessary but not sufficient for empowerment (Eyben et al., 2008; Malhotra et al., 2002; Weber & Ahmad, 2014).

5.4 Sustainability

The unanimous report that groups are involved in community projects and that plans exist to continue beyond donor close-out is encouraging and consistent with the model's design features: self-capitalisation, simple procedures and negligible operating cost (Allen, 2006; Hendricks & Chidiac, 2011). In SLA terms, this suggests that groups are perceived as a durable institutional asset. However, unanimity warrants cautious interpretation. Responses may reflect social desirability or acquiescence, particularly where respondents were approached through group leaders and where interviewer administration was used for non-literate women. Stated intentions are not evidence of realised continuity, and the content and credibility of the plans were not analysed here. Post-project follow-up would be needed to establish whether groups persist, whether they reconstitute after share-out and whether they attain linkages with formal institutions.

6. Policy and Programme Implications

Four implications follow from the findings.

Disaggregate monitoring and tailor support. Because outcomes differed across clans, implementing partners and government agencies should monitor results by clan or village and direct additional facilitation, refresher training and market linkage support to areas such as Mgbakwu where fewer members report gains. Diagnostic follow-up should establish whether the causes lie in group governance, market access or local economic conditions.

Build linkages to formal finance. Group capital is bounded by members' saving capacity, and the homogeneity of groups limits bridging social capital. Facilitating linkages between mature groups and banks or microfinance institutions, for example through an umbrella association of VSLAs that can negotiate access to financial services, inputs and markets, would widen product choice and enable successful groups to move from consumption smoothing to productive investment (Allen, 2006; Hendricks & Chidiac, 2011).

Strengthen agency, not only access. Since the findings do not demonstrate that financial resources translate into decision-making power, programmes should combine savings with financial literacy, business skills and gender-awareness components, and should involve male household members and community leaders so that gains in resources are not offset by constraints on women's control over them (Eyben et al., 2008; Kabeer, 1999).

Plan for sustainability deliberately. Close-out should be a managed process that includes training of village agents, documentation of constitutions and procedures, and mechanisms for periodic verification that groups reconstitute after share-outs. Groups that already invest in community projects could be supported to formalise bylaws governing collective contributions, so that social and economic functions reinforce one another.

7. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations qualify the conclusions. First, the design is cross-sectional and all respondents were VSLA members; without a comparison group or baseline, the study documents perceived outcomes and variation between clans but cannot establish that VSLA participation caused them. Second, outcomes were measured with single self-reported items and, for pre-membership conditions, rely on recall; responses may be subject to social desirability bias,

especially for the unanimous sustainability responses and where interviews were conducted with non-literate respondents. Third, villages were purposively selected for the presence of VSLAs, which restricts generalisation beyond comparable communities. Fourth, bivariate chi-square tests do not control for age, education, marital status, household size or length of membership, all of which may confound clan differences, and the study did not use a validated multidimensional empowerment index. Finally, the data do not explain why clans differ.

Future research should use quasi-experimental or longitudinal designs with non-member comparison groups, apply validated empowerment measures such as indicators of control over income, assets and household decisions, use multivariable models, and combine surveys with qualitative methods to explain intra-LGA variation. Follow-up studies after partner withdrawal would provide the evidence needed to judge whether donor-initiated groups are sustained, and replication in other states would test the findings' wider relevance.

8. Conclusion

This study examined how participation in USAID-supported VSLAs relates to household conditions, enterprise finance, solidarity and sustainability among women in Awka North LGA. Members reported higher savings, greater confidence in saving, improved access to emergency and enterprise credit, and strong group cohesion, and they unanimously expressed intentions to sustain the groups beyond the project cycle. At the same time, perceived household improvement and enterprise-related access varied significantly across clans, with Mgbakwu lagging, whereas solidarity was high everywhere. The results support the view that VSLAs are an effective means of extending basic financial services to rural women, while also showing that their benefits are not uniform and that evidence of empowerment in the fuller sense of agency remains indirect. For policy and practice, the implication is to pair the low-cost VSLA model with locally tailored support, links to formal finance, deliberate attention to women's agency, and structured planning for post-project continuity.

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