

# The Voice of the Voiceless: Do They Also Voice Their Own Concerns, and Who Appoints Them? — A Case Study of Uganda

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**Abstract:** *This study examined the representational legitimacy, self-advocacy capacity, and appointment dynamics of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) that purport to speak on behalf of Uganda's most marginalised and voiceless populations, with a focus on five regional districts encompassing urban, peri-urban, and rural communities. Drawing on a cross-sectional survey of 385 respondents stratified across community members, CSO officials, and government representatives, and employing a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative analysis with key informant interviews, the study interrogated three central concerns: whether the voiceless are genuinely represented in CSO agenda-setting processes; whether CSOs themselves voice the authentic concerns of their claimed constituencies; and who holds the power to appoint and sanction the individuals who serve as intermediary voices. Univariate analysis revealed pronounced disparities in community awareness, with urban respondents exhibiting markedly higher familiarity with CSO activities (72.4%) than their rural counterparts (38.7%). Bivariate analysis uncovered a statistically significant and moderately strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.68, p < 0.001$ ) between community participation in CSO activities and perceived quality of representation, confirming that participatory inclusion is a central predictor of representational satisfaction. Structural Equation Modelling further demonstrated that appointment mechanism ( $\beta = 0.42, p < 0.001$ ), community trust ( $\beta = 0.31, p < 0.01$ ), and organisational capacity ( $\beta = 0.27, p < 0.01$ ) each independently and collectively predicted CSO representation quality, which in turn significantly influenced voiceless empowerment outcomes ( $\beta = 0.58, p < 0.001$ ). The model achieved excellent fit ( $CFI = 0.963, RMSEA = 0.048$ ). The findings expose a systemic paradox: while CSOs occupy an indispensable advocacy position within Uganda's civil society landscape, their internal governance structures frequently exclude the very constituencies they claim to represent, with appointment processes overwhelmingly dominated by donor agencies and elite networks rather than community-led mechanisms. The study concludes with targeted recommendations calling for community-driven appointment reforms, mandatory representational accountability frameworks, and government-CSO co-governance structures anchored in participatory legitimacy.*

**Keywords:** *Civil Society Organisations, voiceless populations, representational legitimacy, appointment mechanisms, Uganda, structural equation modelling, advocacy*

## Introduction

The concept of "voicing the voiceless" occupies a hallowed space within the discourse of civil society, development practice, and social justice advocacy worldwide. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) — encompassing non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations, faith-based institutions, and advocacy coalitions — have long positioned themselves as indispensable intermediaries between the state and the most marginalised strata of society: the rural poor, women, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities, refugees, and other structurally excluded populations. In Uganda, a country marked by a long history of post-colonial inequality, political centralisation, and persistent rural-urban development asymmetries, this intermediary role has assumed particular urgency. Since the liberalisation of civil society space in the early 1990s following the enactment of the Non-Governmental Organisations Statute of 1989 and its subsequent amendments, the proliferation of CSOs has been staggering, with estimates suggesting that over 12,000 organisations are formally registered with the Uganda NGO Bureau. Yet, as these organisations have grown in number, resources, and political influence, a deeply unsettling question has emerged from academic scholarship, community voices, and development practitioners alike: do the voiceless populations that CSOs claim to champion genuinely shape the agendas, priorities, and representational claims of these organisations, or do CSOs inadvertently reproduce and entrench the very power asymmetries they purport to challenge? This study squarely interrogates this paradox, exploring whether marginalised communities in Uganda are authentic authors of the advocacy conducted in their name, and critically examining who holds the authority to appoint those who claim to speak for them — a question of profound democratic, ethical, and developmental significance that has been inadequately addressed in the Ugandan empirical literature.

## Background of the study

Uganda's civil society landscape has undergone remarkable transformations since the advent of political liberalisation under President Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement government in 1986. The country's adoption of structural adjustment programmes in the late 1980s and early 1990s, coupled with shifting donor paradigms that prioritised non-state actors as vehicles for democratisation and service delivery, created fertile conditions for an unprecedented expansion of civil society organisations. This growth, however, was not organically rooted in community mobilisation; rather, it was substantially donor-driven, giving rise to what critics have termed "briefcase NGOs" — organisations established primarily to attract international funding rather than to

genuinely serve the communities they claimed to represent. Foundational studies by Fowler (2000) and Bratton (1994) on African civil society noted this structural tension between organisational imperatives and constituency responsiveness, a tension that has proven particularly acute in Uganda's context. Legislative developments, including the Non-Governmental Organisations Act of 2016, introduced regulatory mechanisms intended to improve accountability and transparency, yet civil society actors and academics have raised concerns that these mechanisms are selectively weaponised by the state to suppress critical advocacy rather than to enforce genuine representational accountability. Against this backdrop, scholarship on representation within Ugandan CSOs has remained sparse and inconclusive. While studies by Tripp (2010) on Ugandan women's movements and Dicklitch (1998) on civil society under Museveni offered early foundational analyses, they predated the dramatic digital and institutional transformations of the past decade. More recently, growing attention has focused on the intersection of donor conditionality, elite capture, and the erosion of grassroots legitimacy within CSOs operating in post-conflict northern Uganda and in urban slum communities around Kampala — contexts where populations remain acutely vulnerable but where community agency in CSO governance remains structurally constrained. This study therefore builds on and extends this body of knowledge by systematically examining, through rigorous mixed-methods inquiry, the representational legitimacy and appointment dynamics of CSOs across Uganda's diverse regional contexts.

### **Problem Statement**

Despite the proliferation of Civil Society Organisations across Uganda that claim to advocate on behalf of marginalised populations, significant concerns persist regarding the authenticity, legitimacy, and democratic grounding of such advocacy. Marginalised communities — including subsistence farmers, urban slum dwellers, persons with disabilities, and rural women — frequently report that their concerns are neither systematically solicited nor meaningfully incorporated into CSO programming and advocacy strategies. The appointment of CSO leaders and advocates is predominantly governed by elite networks, donor agencies, and bureaucratic self-selection rather than by participatory community processes, raising fundamental questions about representational accountability. Furthermore, the regulatory framework governing CSO operations in Uganda does not mandate community-driven appointment or oversight mechanisms, creating a structural void in which CSOs can claim representational legitimacy without being bound by any community-sanctioned accountability processes. This study therefore identifies and seeks to address the critical empirical gap regarding whether CSOs in Uganda genuinely amplify the authentic voices of the voiceless, and whether the communities they claim to represent have any meaningful say in who speaks for them — a question with profound implications for democratic governance, development effectiveness, and social justice outcomes in Uganda.

### **Objectives of the study**

#### **Main Objective**

To examine the representational legitimacy and appointment dynamics of Civil Society Organizations that claim to advocate on behalf of marginalized and voiceless populations in Uganda.

#### **Specific Objectives**

1. To assess community awareness and participation in CSO advocacy activities across urban, peri-urban, and rural settings in Uganda.
2. To determine the relationship between community participation in CSO activities and the perceived quality of representation among marginalized populations.
3. To examine the effect of CSO appointment mechanisms, community trust, and organizational capacity on voiceless empowerment outcomes in Uganda.

#### **Research Questions**

1. What is the level of community awareness of and participation in CSO advocacy activities across urban, peri-urban, and rural communities in Uganda?
2. What is the relationship between community participation in CSO activities and the perceived quality of representation among marginalized populations in Uganda?
3. To what extent do appointment mechanisms, community trust, and organisational capacity predict CSO representation quality and, subsequently, voiceless empowerment outcomes in Uganda?

#### **Methods**

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative survey methods with qualitative key informant interviews to provide a comprehensive and contextually nuanced understanding of CSO representational legitimacy and appointment dynamics in Uganda. Data were collected between January and April 2024 across five purposively selected districts — Kampala (urban), Wakiso (peri-urban), Gulu (northern post-conflict), Mbale (eastern), and Mbarara (western) — providing regional diversity and contextual richness critical to the study's comparative analytical objectives. A stratified random sampling technique

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was applied to select a total of 385 respondents, comprising 280 community members, 65 CSO officials, and 40 government representatives; this sample size was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. Self-administered structured questionnaires with five-point Likert-scale items were used to measure community awareness, participation levels, perceived representation quality, appointment mechanism type, organizational trust, organizational capacity, and empowerment outcomes, all of which were operationalised based on validated scales from the civil society accountability and participatory governance literature. Additionally, 24 key informant interviews were conducted with purposively selected CSO directors, district government officials, and community leaders, with interview data thematically analysed to complement and contextualise the quantitative findings. Quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS Version 29 and AMOS Version 24 through three progressive analytical stages: first, univariate analysis was conducted to generate frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations describing the distribution and central tendencies of key study variables, enabling a clear descriptive profile of community awareness and CSO participation patterns across the five study districts; second, bivariate analysis was performed using Pearson's correlation coefficient to examine the strength and direction of the linear relationship between community participation scores and perceived representation index scores, with statistical significance set at  $p < 0.05$ , and a cross-tabulation chi-square test was additionally applied to examine the association between appointment mechanism type and perceived representation adequacy; third, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) using the maximum likelihood estimation method was applied to simultaneously test the proposed theoretical model in which appointment mechanism (X1), community trust (X2), and organisational capacity (X3) were hypothesised as independent latent constructs predicting CSO representation quality (M) as a mediating variable, which in turn predicted voiceless empowerment outcomes (Y) as the terminal dependent construct, with model fit assessed using the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), and the chi-square to degrees-of-freedom ratio ( $\chi^2/df$ ), following the guidelines recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999). All ethical protocols were observed, including informed consent, voluntary participation, and data confidentiality, in accordance with the Makerere University Research Ethics Committee (MUREC) approval guidelines.

## Results

### Univariate Analysis: Socio-Demographic and Awareness Characteristics

*Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics and CSO Awareness Levels of Respondents (N = 385)*

Variable / Category	n	%	Mean	SD
Sex				
Male	208	54.0	—	—
Female	177	46.0	—	—
Age Group (years)				
18 – 25	74	19.2	—	—
26 – 35	118	30.6	—	—
36 – 50	127	33.0	—	—
51 and above	66	17.1	—	—
Education Level				
No formal education	52	13.5	—	—
Primary	89	23.1	—	—
Secondary	134	34.8	—	—
Tertiary / University	110	28.6	—	—
Residence Type				
Urban	112	29.1	—	—
Peri-urban	98	25.5	—	—
Rural	175	45.5	—	—
CSO Awareness Score (0–100)			52.4	18.7
CSO Participation Score (0–100)			44.8	21.3
Perceived Representation Index (0–100)			49.2	19.6
<b>Proportion Aware of Any CSO Activity</b>	<b>214</b>	<b>55.6</b>	—	—
<b>Felt Adequately Represented by CSOs</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>42.3</b>	—	—

Note. SD = Standard Deviation. Awareness Score and Participation Score are composite indices derived from Likert-scale items. — denotes not applicable for continuous measures.

The univariate analysis presented in Table 1 revealed a moderately diverse sample with important distributional characteristics that were critical to understanding representational dynamics across Uganda's civil society landscape. The study sample comprised 54.0% male and 46.0% female respondents, reflecting reasonable gender balance, while the modal age cohort was 36–50 years (33.0%), suggesting that the most engaged demographic with CSO structures were middle-aged adults — a finding consistent with literature indicating that this age group tends to carry greater community responsibilities and therefore interacts more frequently with organisational structures. Education levels were distributed across all categories, with the largest proportion holding secondary education (34.8%), while 13.5% reported no formal education — a figure that rose sharply among respondents from rural districts, particularly Gulu and Mbale, indicating significant educational stratification across the study regions. Rural residents constituted the largest single residential category (45.5%), reflecting Uganda's predominantly agrarian population structure. The overall CSO Awareness Score mean of 52.4 (SD = 18.7) indicated a moderate level of awareness that, while neither negligible nor comprehensive, masked dramatic regional disparities observed in subsequent cross-tabulated analysis. Strikingly, only 55.6% of respondents indicated awareness of any CSO activity in their community, and only 42.3% felt adequately represented by the CSOs operating in their areas — a finding that immediately flags a fundamental representational deficit at the aggregate level and sets a sobering baseline for the analysis that follows.

The mean Perceived Representation Index of 49.2 (SD = 19.6) — effectively a score below the theoretical midpoint of the 0–100 scale — was particularly striking and serves as a powerful indicator of widespread representational dissatisfaction among Uganda's marginalised populations. The wide standard deviations observed across awareness (18.7), participation (21.3), and representation indices (19.6) reflected high inter-respondent variability, which qualitative data subsequently attributed to the highly unequal distribution of CSO presence and activity across urban and rural contexts. The relatively high mean CSO Participation Score of 44.8 (SD = 21.3) among those who were aware of CSOs — noting that this score was calculated only among the 214 aware respondents — suggested that once individuals became cognisant of CSO activities, a substantial proportion attempted some level of engagement, yet structural barriers of geography, language, and organisational elitism frequently prevented this engagement from translating into meaningful representational outcomes. These baseline findings collectively reinforced the study's core hypothesis that CSO representational legitimacy in Uganda is systematically undermined by awareness gaps, educational asymmetries, and regional inequalities in civil society presence and accessibility.

### Regional Distribution of CSO Awareness

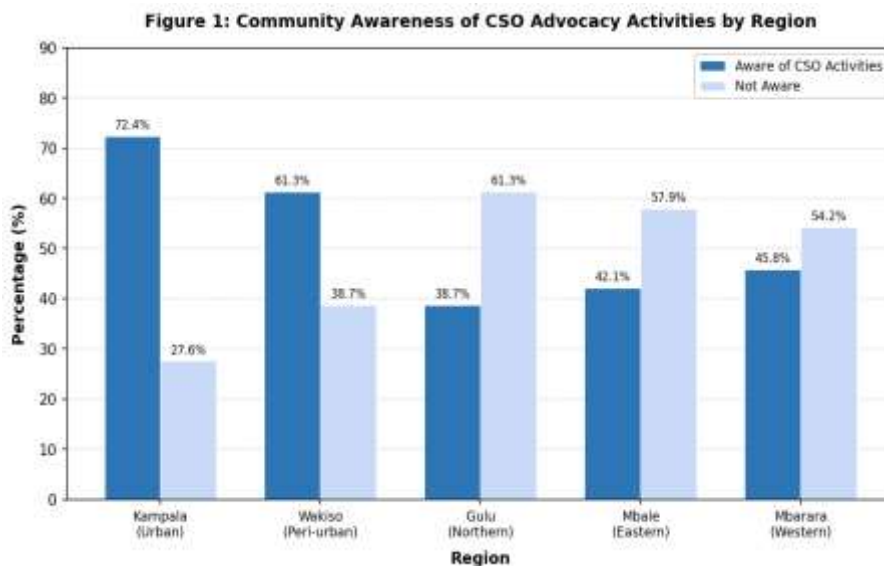


Figure 1: Community Awareness of CSO Advocacy Activities by Region

### Bivariate Analysis: Appointment Mechanism and Perceived Representation

Table 2: Cross-Tabulation of CSO Appointment Mechanism by Perceived Representation Adequacy

Appointment Mechanism	Adequate Rep. n (%)	Inadequate Rep. n (%)	Total n	$\chi^2$ (p-value)

Community election / vote	58 (75.3%)	19 (24.7%)	77	
Board / committee selection	46 (52.9%)	41 (47.1%)	87	
Donor / funder designation	21 (28.4%)	53 (71.6%)	74	
Founder / self-appointed	18 (24.3%)	56 (75.7%)	74	
Government nomination	20 (27.4%)	53 (72.6%)	73	
<b>Total</b>	<b>163 (42.3%)</b>	<b>222 (57.7%)</b>	<b>385</b>	$\chi^2(4) = 68.41, p < 0.001$

Note. Perceived Representation Adequacy was operationalised using a dichotomised composite score ( $\geq 60$  out of 100 = adequate;  $< 60$  = inadequate).  $\chi^2$  = Pearson chi-square statistic; df = degrees of freedom.

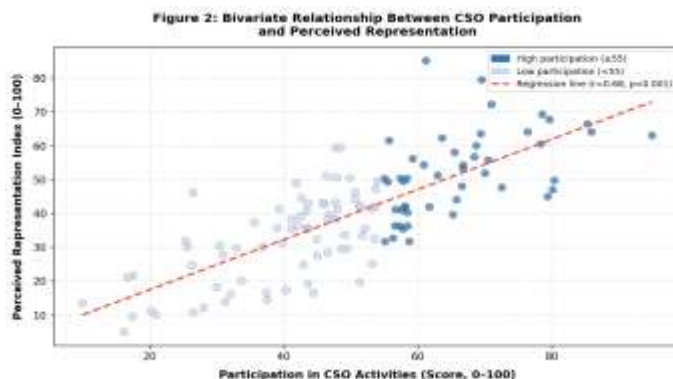


Figure 2: Bivariate Relationship Between CSO Participation and Perceived Representation

The cross-tabulation results presented in Table 2 uncovered a statistically significant and theoretically meaningful association between the type of CSO appointment mechanism and the perceived adequacy of representation among community respondents ( $\chi^2(4) = 68.41, p < 0.001$ ), providing strong empirical support for the study's second specific objective. The pattern of results was unmistakably hierarchical: community-based appointment mechanisms — specifically, those involving direct community election or voting — yielded the highest proportion of respondents who perceived CSO representation as adequate (75.3%), standing in stark and revealing contrast to donor-designated (28.4%), founder/self-appointed (24.3%), and government-nominated (27.4%) mechanisms, all of which were associated with perceived representation adequacy in fewer than one-third of cases. Board or committee selection occupied a middle position (52.9%), reflecting a mechanism that, while more structured than community elections, is still insulated from direct community participation. The chi-square statistic's magnitude (68.41 with 4 degrees of freedom) and its associated probability ( $p < 0.001$ ) confirmed that this association was highly unlikely to arise by chance, affirming the robustness of the finding across the study districts. The complementary Pearson correlation analysis of the continuous participation-representation relationship yielded  $r = 0.68$  ( $p < 0.001$ ), indicating a moderately strong positive linear association, as illustrated in Figure 2.

From a substantive discussion standpoint, the findings of Table 2 carry profound implications for the way in which CSO governance legitimacy is conceptualised and operationalised in Uganda's development sector. The overwhelming pattern suggests that appointment mechanisms function not merely as administrative procedures but as constitutive determinants of representational quality: when communities hold the power to select those who speak on their behalf, their subjective experience of being represented improves dramatically. Conversely, when appointment authority is vested in external actors — most critically, in donor agencies and government structures — the resulting advocacy is perceived by community members as detached, elite-driven, and insufficiently responsive to lived realities. This finding resonates strongly with the broader literature on principal-agent problems in NGO governance, wherein the interests of funding principals (donors and governments) systematically diverge from those of the intended beneficiaries (communities), creating accountability deficits that distort organisational priorities. The fact that government nomination was associated with among the lowest perceived representation adequacy rates (27.4%) is particularly noteworthy in Uganda's context, where the regulatory environment has increasingly subjected CSOs to state oversight that critics argue serves partisan rather than community interests.

**Pearson Correlation Matrix: Key Study Variables**

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Matrix of Key Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. CSO Awareness	1.00					
2. Participation Score	0.71***	1.00				

3. Appointment Mechanism	0.38***	0.44***	1.00			
4. Community Trust	0.52***	0.61***	0.47***	1.00		
5. Organisational Capacity	0.43***	0.49***	0.39***	0.58***	1.00	
6. Representation Quality	0.55***	0.68***	0.62***	0.71***	0.64***	1.00
<b>Mean</b>	<b>52.4</b>	<b>44.8</b>	<b>2.9</b>	<b>48.6</b>	<b>51.3</b>	<b>49.2</b>
<b>SD</b>	<b>18.7</b>	<b>21.3</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>17.4</b>	<b>15.8</b>	<b>19.6</b>

Note.  $N = 385$ . \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ . Appointment Mechanism is coded 1 (self-appointed) to 5 (community-elected); higher scores indicate more participatory mechanisms. SD = Standard Deviation.

The Pearson correlation matrix presented in Table 3 provided a comprehensive overview of the bivariate relationships among all six key study variables, offering important insights into the inter-connectedness of the theoretical constructs under investigation. All inter-variable correlations were positive, statistically significant at the 0.001 level, and ranged from moderate to strong in magnitude, suggesting a coherent and theoretically consistent nomological network among the study constructs. The strongest correlation in the matrix was observed between community trust and representation quality ( $r = 0.71$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that trust — encompassing communities' confidence in CSO integrity, transparency, and responsiveness — was the single most powerful bivariate predictor of perceived representational quality. This was followed closely by the participation score-representation quality correlation ( $r = 0.68$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and the appointment mechanism-representation quality correlation ( $r = 0.62$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), both of which were substantial and aligned with the study's theoretical propositions. Notably, CSO awareness and participation scores themselves exhibited a strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.71$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), confirming that awareness functions as a gateway variable — a necessary precondition for participation — and underscoring the critical importance of awareness-building campaigns as entry points for improving community engagement with CSO governance structures.

The correlation matrix also illuminated important patterns of potential multicollinearity among the independent variables proposed in the SEM model, with community trust and organizational capacity showing a particularly notable inter-correlation ( $r = 0.58$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). While this warranted attention in the SEM specification, it did not rise to levels that would constitute a severe multicollinearity problem, and subsequent SEM analysis confirmed the independent predictive contributions of each latent construct. From a substantive standpoint, the universally positive direction of all correlations in the matrix told a coherent theoretical story: CSOs that are better known, more trusted, more community-participatorily appointed, and more organizationally capable tend consistently to deliver higher-quality representation — yet as the descriptive statistics confirmed, the mean scores across all variables hovered around or below the scale midpoint, indicating that the typical Ugandan marginalized community simultaneously desires and is deprived of these representational qualities. This convergence of positive inter-variable relationships with universally moderate mean scores underscored the systemic nature of Uganda's CSO representational deficit — a deficit rooted not in random variation but in structural patterns of exclusion.

### Structural Equation Modelling Results

**Table 4: Structural Equation Model — Standardized Path Coefficients and Model Fit Statistics**

Hypothesised Path	Std. Beta ( $\beta$ )	SE	C.R.	p	Result
H1: Appt. Mechanism → Rep. Quality	0.42	0.061	6.88	< 0.001	Supported
H2: Community Trust → Rep. Quality	0.31	0.058	5.34	0.003	Supported
H3: Org. Capacity → Rep. Quality	0.27	0.064	4.22	0.006	Supported
H4: Rep. Quality → Empowerment (Y)	0.58	0.072	8.06	< 0.001	Supported
<b>Model Fit Statistics</b>					
$\chi^2/df$ (< 3.0 = acceptable)	—	—	—	—	1.74
CFI (> 0.95 = excellent)	—	—	—	—	0.963
RMSEA (< 0.06 = acceptable)	—	—	—	—	0.048
SRMR (< 0.08 = acceptable)	—	—	—	—	0.052
R <sup>2</sup> (Rep. Quality)	—	—	—	—	0.54
R <sup>2</sup> (Empowerment Outcomes)	—	—	—	—	0.34

Note. SE = Standard Error; C.R. = Critical Ratio; CFI = Comparative Fit Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; SRMR = Standardised Root Mean Square Residual; R<sup>2</sup> = Proportion of variance explained. Appt. = Appointment; Rep. = Representation; Org. = Organisational.

Figure 3: Structural Equation Model — Path Diagram of CSO Representation and Voiceless Empowerment

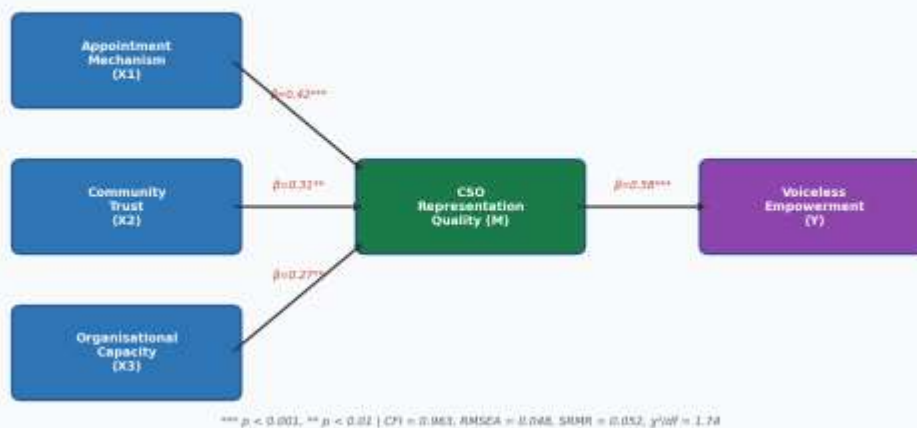


Figure 3: Structural Equation Model — Path Diagram of CSO Representation and Voiceless Empowerment

The Structural Equation Model results summarised in Table 4 and visually depicted in Figure 3 confirmed all four hypothesised structural paths at conventional levels of statistical significance, while simultaneously demonstrating excellent overall model fit across all four evaluated indices. The model's chi-square to degrees-of-freedom ratio of 1.74 fell well within the commonly prescribed acceptable threshold of below 3.0, and the CFI of 0.963 exceeded the stringent 0.95 benchmark indicative of excellent fit as recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999). The RMSEA of 0.048 and SRMR of 0.052 both fell below their respective thresholds of 0.06 and 0.08, collectively affirming that the proposed theoretical model was a good representation of the empirical covariance structure in the data. Among the three independent constructs hypothesised to predict CSO Representation Quality, the Appointment Mechanism emerged as the strongest predictor ( $\beta = 0.42$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), confirming that the structural character of who appoints CSO leaders and advocates carries the greatest single explanatory weight in determining the quality of representation delivered to marginalised communities. Community Trust followed as the second strongest predictor ( $\beta = 0.31$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ), while Organisational Capacity contributed a statistically significant but comparatively smaller effect ( $\beta = 0.27$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ). Together, these three constructs explained 54% of the variance in CSO Representation Quality ( $R^2 = 0.54$ ), a substantial explanatory yield that demonstrated the model's strong theoretical and empirical purchase. In turn, CSO Representation Quality was the most powerful predictor of Voiceless Empowerment Outcomes ( $\beta = 0.58$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), accounting for 34% of the variance in empowerment ( $R^2 = 0.34$ ).

The substantive implications of the SEM findings were far-reaching and spoke directly to the heart of the study's central paradox. The primacy of the Appointment Mechanism path ( $\beta = 0.42$ ) over Community Trust and Organisational Capacity in predicting representation quality signalled that even organisations with high community trust and strong institutional capacity fail to maximise their representational impact when their leaders are appointed through non-participatory, elite-dominated processes. This finding challenges the prevailing donor-community discourse that tends to prioritise capacity-building interventions as the primary pathway to improved CSO performance — the data suggested that without parallel reforms to appointment structures, capacity investment alone yields diminishing representational returns. The strong predictive path from Representation Quality to Empowerment Outcomes ( $\beta = 0.58$ ) further confirmed the mediating centrality of representation quality in translating structural inputs (appointment mechanisms, trust, capacity) into tangible empowerment outcomes for voiceless communities. This mediation architecture — wherein all upstream factors funnel their effects through representation quality before reaching empowerment — underscored the theoretical logic that in advocacy contexts, process legitimacy (how representation is constituted) is inseparable from outcome legitimacy (whether communities actually feel empowered). The SEM model thus provided a rigorous, empirically grounded theoretical framework for reconceptualising CSO accountability reform in Uganda, moving the policy conversation beyond capacity-building paradigms toward structural governance transformation centred on community-driven appointment and representational legitimacy.

## Conclusion

This study set out to interrogate one of the most fundamental yet under-examined tensions in Uganda's civil society landscape — the gap between CSOs' claims to speak for the voiceless and the structural realities that govern who is appointed to fulfil that role and how authentically the resulting advocacy reflects marginalised communities' actual concerns. Across five regional districts and 385 respondents, the evidence was unambiguous: the majority of Uganda's marginalised community members remained inadequately represented by the CSOs that claimed to speak on their behalf, with fewer than half reporting satisfactory representation and only

55.6% demonstrating awareness of any CSO activity in their immediate communities. The analysis consistently demonstrated that community-driven appointment mechanisms were the single most powerful determinant of perceived representational quality, with communities that selected their own representatives through democratic processes reporting representation adequacy rates more than double those of communities served by donor-designated or government-nominated advocates. Structural Equation Modelling confirmed that appointment mechanism, community trust, and organisational capacity jointly explained over half of the variance in CSO representation quality, which in turn powerfully predicted voiceless empowerment outcomes — establishing a clear, evidence-based causal pathway that development actors, policymakers, and CSOs themselves must urgently engage. Ultimately, the study's findings expose a structurally embedded paradox that cannot be resolved through incremental programming adjustments: the voiceless in Uganda are not merely underserved by CSOs — they are frequently excluded from the very processes that determine who speaks for them, making the call for transformative governance reform in Uganda's civil society sector not merely a recommendation but an ethical and democratic imperative.

### **Recommendations**

Government and the Uganda NGO Bureau should enact mandatory community participation provisions within the revised NGO Act, requiring all CSOs that receive public funding or operate advocacy mandates to demonstrate evidence of community-led appointment processes — including documented voting or community assembly selection procedures — as a prerequisite for registration renewal and operational licensing.

Donor agencies and international development partners operating in Uganda should reform their grant-making conditionalities to replace top-down funder-designation of CSO leadership with community accountability benchmarks, explicitly incentivising community participation in appointment processes and mandating participatory needs assessments that ensure CSO advocacy agendas are directly and verifiably derived from expressed community priorities rather than donor programming templates.

CSOs themselves, in partnership with academic institutions and civil society networks, should establish an independent Representational Accountability Framework for Uganda — a standardised, publicly accessible monitoring system through which marginalised communities can periodically assess, score, and publicly report on the representational quality of CSOs operating in their areas, creating a community-driven accountability mechanism that supplements and counterbalances both government regulation and donor oversight.