

The Voice of the Voiceless: When Will the Voice Voice Its Concerns? — A Case Study of Uganda

Dr. Mategeko Betty¹, Ahumuza Audrey², Dr. Twinomujuni Rosebell³

1,2,3 Metropolitan International University

ABSTRACT: *This study examined the determinants of civic voice among marginalized communities in Uganda, under the thematic framework — The Voice of the Voiceless: When Will the Voice Voice Its Concerns? Drawing on a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 400 respondents across five Ugandan districts — Kampala, Wakiso, Gulu, Mbarara, and Mbale — using stratified random sampling. The study employed a triangulated analytical strategy comprising univariate descriptive statistics, bivariate correlation and chi-square analysis, multiple linear regression, and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to examine the relationships among structural barriers, empowerment resources, institutional trust, and the Civic Voice Index (CVI). Findings revealed that access to information ($\beta^* = 0.334, p < 0.001$), education level ($\beta^* = 0.289, p < 0.001$), and economic empowerment ($\beta^* = 0.214, p < 0.001$) were the strongest positive predictors of civic voice, while fear of reprisal exerted the most significant suppressive effect ($\beta^* = -0.274, p < 0.001$). The SEM results confirmed that empowerment resources were the strongest direct driver of civic voice ($\beta = 0.487, p < 0.001$), and that institutional trust partially mediated the relationship between empowerment and civic voice (indirect $\beta = 0.193, p < 0.001$). The composite CVI mean of 2.76 out of 5.00 indicated a persistently low level of civic engagement, reflecting a pervasive culture of silence rooted in structural exclusion, institutional distrust, and socio-economic vulnerability. The study concludes that fostering meaningful civic participation in Uganda requires coordinated, multi-sectoral interventions targeting information access, institutional accountability, and grassroots economic empowerment. Policymakers, civil society organisations, and development partners are urged to co-design participatory platforms that lower the barriers to civic expression and rebuild the trust between citizens and governance institutions.*

Keywords: Civic Voice, Voiceless Communities, Uganda, Civic Engagement, Institutional Trust, Structural Equation Modelling, Empowerment, Governance

INTRODUCTION

In democratic societies, the concept of civic voice — the capacity and willingness of citizens to express their needs, grievances, and aspirations within formal and informal governance structures — is considered a cornerstone of participatory governance and democratic legitimacy (Eneanya, 2018). Yet, across sub-Saharan Africa, and particularly in Uganda, vast segments of the population remain systematically silenced, rendering their voices absent from the very political and institutional spaces that determine the quality of their lives (Majaro-Majesty et al., 2023; Sikdar, 2020). Uganda, a nation of over 47 million people characterised by a youthful population, persistent poverty, and a governance landscape shaped by decades of centralised political authority, presents an acutely important case for studying the phenomenon of civic silence (Shephard et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2022). Despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression, assembly, and participation under the 1995 Constitution of Uganda (as amended), empirical evidence suggests that these rights remain largely aspirational for rural populations, urban slum dwellers, women, persons with disabilities, and other historically marginalised groups (Cheung, 2019; Ju & Kim, 2023). The paradox at the heart of this study is both theoretical and practical: in a society where the voices of the many are needed the most — to hold leaders accountable, to demand services, and to shape development priorities — those very voices remain the most suppressed (Lee, 2025; Pradana et al., 2025). This study, therefore, takes its motivation from this paradox, seeking to understand not merely whether the voiceless can speak, but more precisely, under what structural, institutional, and socio-economic conditions they are enabled or constrained to do so. By situating this inquiry within the Ugandan context, the study contributes to the broader discourse on inclusive governance, participatory democracy, and the politics of silencing in the Global South.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Uganda's post-independence political history has been marked by cycles of authoritarian governance, civil conflict, and institutional fragility, all of which have profoundly shaped the civic culture of its citizens. From the turbulent regimes of the 1970s and early 1980s to the prolonged presidency of Yoweri Museveni since 1986, the country has oscillated between democratic aspirations and the practical realities of constrained political space (Julius, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c). While Uganda has held multiparty elections since 2006, international observers and civil society organisations have consistently documented concerns around electoral malpractice, suppression of opposition, restrictions on civil society, and the use of security forces to silence dissent (Eliasoph et al., 1996; Feng et al., 2025). The decentralisation policy introduced in the 1990s was designed to bring governance closer to the people and create channels for local civic participation; however, its implementation has been hampered by elite capture, limited fiscal transfers, and a largely passive citizenry conditioned by years of political repression (Julius, 2025d; Julius & Twinomujuni, 2025a, 2025b).

Academic literature on civic participation in Uganda has identified a complex interplay of factors that determine whether citizens engage with governance systems, including educational attainment, access to information through media, the role of civil society organisations, and community-level social capital (Callahan & Obenchain, 2012; Cooke-Jackson, 2018). Particularly striking is the documented gender dimension of civic exclusion: women, who constitute over half of Uganda's population and bear disproportionate burdens of poverty and service deficits, remain underrepresented in local government structures and are frequently deterred from civic participation by patriarchal norms, economic dependence, and fear of social sanction. This study builds on this body of knowledge to construct a systematic, empirically grounded account of why civic voice remains elusive for so many Ugandans, using a multi-district sample and rigorous quantitative methods to identify the most critical structural and contextual predictors.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite Uganda's formal democratic architecture and the constitutional entrenchment of civic rights, a substantial proportion of the citizenry — particularly those in rural areas, low-income communities, and historically marginalised groups — continues to experience profound civic disempowerment. The persistence of this civic silence is not merely a political inconvenience; it has material consequences for service delivery, governance accountability, and the social contract between the state and its citizens (Kang et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2021). Existing studies have largely approached civic engagement in Uganda through qualitative or small-scale empirical lenses, leaving critical gaps in the quantitative understanding of how structural factors, institutional dynamics, and individual-level attributes interact to either enable or suppress civic voice (Julius & Audrey, 2025a, 2025b). Furthermore, no comprehensive, multi-level statistical investigation has modelled the pathways through which structural barriers and empowerment resources jointly influence citizens' willingness to voice their concerns in Uganda (Knight, 2026; Mihailidis, 2022; Wilson, 2017). This study addresses that gap by deploying a rigorous mixed-analytical framework — including Structural Equation Modelling — to provide a statistically robust account of the determinants of civic voice in Uganda and to identify the most leverage-worthy intervention points for policymakers and development practitioners.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Main Objective

The main objective of this study was to examine the structural, institutional, and socio-economic determinants of civic voice among marginalised communities in Uganda.

Specific Objectives

1. To assess the levels of civic engagement and the Civic Voice Index (CVI) among respondents across selected Ugandan districts.
2. To determine the socio-economic and demographic predictors of civic voice among marginalised communities in Uganda.
3. To model the structural pathways through which empowerment resources and institutional trust influence civic voice in Uganda using Structural Equation Modelling.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the prevailing level of civic voice and engagement among marginalised communities in Uganda?
2. Which socio-economic and demographic factors are the most significant predictors of civic voice among Ugandan citizens?
3. How do structural barriers, empowerment resources, and institutional trust interact to shape civic voice as modelled through Structural Equation Modelling?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a cross-sectional, quantitative survey design to systematically examine the determinants of civic voice among marginalised communities across five purposively selected Ugandan districts — Kampala, Wakiso, Gulu, Mbarara, and Mbale — chosen to represent diverse geographic, socio-economic, and political contexts within the country. A sample of 400 respondents was drawn using stratified random sampling, with strata defined by district, sex, and age group, thereby ensuring proportional representation of key demographic subgroups and enhancing the generalisability of the findings. Data were collected between January and March 2026 through structured interviewer-administered questionnaires, which captured information on respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, civic knowledge and awareness, participation in community governance, satisfaction with service delivery, trust in government institutions, media access, and willingness to voice grievances; responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree/never) to 5 (strongly agree/always). A composite Civic Voice Index (CVI) was

constructed by averaging scores across seven civic engagement indicators, and its internal consistency was confirmed through Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.83$), indicating strong reliability. The data were analysed using a multi-layered statistical strategy: at the univariate level, frequency distributions, means, standard deviations, and skewness statistics were computed to describe the distribution and central tendency of all study variables; at the bivariate level, Pearson correlation coefficients and chi-square tests of independence were used to examine the pairwise associations between civic voice and key predictors, with effect sizes reported as phi (ϕ) and Cramér's V for categorical variables; at the multivariate level, a hierarchical multiple linear regression model was fitted to identify independent predictors of the CVI, with model diagnostics conducted for multicollinearity (Variance Inflation Factor, VIF < 3.2 for all predictors), heteroscedasticity (Breusch-Pagan test, $p = 0.214$), and normality of residuals (Shapiro-Wilk test on residuals, $p = 0.318$), confirming that all ordinary least squares assumptions were adequately satisfied; finally, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was employed using AMOS 28.0 to model the complex, simultaneous pathways among latent constructs — structural barriers, empowerment resources, institutional trust, and civic voice — with model fit assessed using the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardised Root Mean Residual (SRMR), and mediation effects tested through 5,000-sample bootstrapping to generate bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals for indirect effects. All analyses were conducted in IBM SPSS Statistics 29 and AMOS 28.0, and statistical significance was evaluated at the conventional $\alpha = 0.05$ threshold.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 400)

| Demographic Variable | Category | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------|---------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Sex | Male | 198 | 49.5 |
| | Female | 202 | 50.5 |
| Age Group | 18–25 years | 84 | 21.0 |
| | 26–35 years | 128 | 32.0 |
| | 36–45 years | 96 | 24.0 |
| | 46–55 years | 62 | 15.5 |
| | 56+ years | 30 | 7.5 |
| Education Level | No formal education | 42 | 10.5 |
| | Primary | 76 | 19.0 |
| | Secondary | 118 | 29.5 |
| | Tertiary/University | 164 | 41.0 |
| District | Kampala | 110 | 27.5 |
| | Wakiso | 88 | 22.0 |
| | Gulu | 72 | 18.0 |
| | Mbarara | 66 | 16.5 |
| | Mbale | 64 | 16.0 |
| Total | | 400 | 100.0 |

The socio-demographic profile of the 400 respondents revealed a broadly balanced sample with near-equal representation by sex — 49.5% male and 50.5% female — providing a gender-equitable base for drawing comparative inferences about civic engagement. The age distribution indicated that the bulk of respondents (32.0%) were in the 26–35 years bracket, followed by those aged 36–45 years (24.0%) and 18–25 years (21.0%), collectively accounting for 77.0% of the sample. This concentration in the economically active and reproductively engaged age groups is not only consistent with Uganda's youthful demographic structure but also theoretically significant, as these age cohorts bear the greatest burden of unmet service needs and are therefore the most likely candidates for civic mobilisation. The relatively small proportion of respondents aged 56 and above (7.5%) reflected both the country's demographic reality and the practical difficulties of recruiting older respondents in remote survey areas. Regarding educational attainment, a notable 41.0% of respondents held tertiary or university-level qualifications, while 29.5% had completed secondary education. However, 10.5% reported no formal education and 19.0% had only primary schooling, indicating that a significant minority of the sample — nearly 30% — possessed limited educational capital, which prior literature consistently associates with reduced civic awareness and participatory engagement. The five-district composition ensured geographic spread, with Kampala contributing the largest share (27.5%), reflecting its urban density and relative ease of access, while Mbale and Mbarara contributed the smallest shares at 16.0% and 16.5%, respectively.

From a methodological standpoint, the distributional balance across sex and age strata affirmed the adequacy of the stratified random sampling procedure and reduced the risk of non-response bias, which is a common threat in survey-based civic engagement research

conducted in politically sensitive contexts such as Uganda. The relatively high representation of tertiary-educated respondents — while reflective of urban-biased sampling in Kampala and Wakiso — introduced a moderate upward skew in the educational attainment variable, suggesting that the CVI mean scores reported in subsequent tables may slightly overestimate the civic voice levels of the broader Ugandan population, which has an adult literacy rate of approximately 77% and a secondary completion rate of under 35% (UNESCO, 2023). This sampling artefact was addressed analytically by controlling for education level in the regression and SEM models, thereby isolating its independent contribution to civic voice from potential confounding. The district-level distribution also enabled cross-regional comparisons, with Gulu — a post-conflict zone in northern Uganda — expected to exhibit distinctive patterns of civic disengagement relative to the more politically integrated southern districts, a hypothesis examined in the bivariate and multivariate analyses that follow.

Table 2: Univariate Statistics — Civic Voice Index and Component Indicators

| Civic Engagement Indicator | Mean (μ) | Std Dev (σ) | Min | Max | Skewness |
|---------------------------------------|----------------|----------------------|-----|-----|----------|
| Awareness of rights & freedoms | 3.42 | 0.97 | 1 | 5 | -0.31 |
| Participation in community meetings | 2.88 | 1.12 | 1 | 5 | 0.18 |
| Engagement with local leaders | 2.61 | 1.08 | 1 | 5 | 0.44 |
| Satisfaction with service delivery | 2.34 | 1.05 | 1 | 5 | 0.67 |
| Confidence in government institutions | 2.19 | 1.14 | 1 | 5 | 0.82 |
| Media access and information use | 3.11 | 1.21 | 1 | 5 | 0.05 |
| Willingness to report grievances | 2.74 | 1.09 | 1 | 5 | 0.29 |
| Composite Civic Voice Index (CVI) | 2.76 | 0.88 | 1 | 5 | 0.34 |

The univariate analysis of the seven civic engagement indicators and the composite Civic Voice Index (CVI) revealed a consistently low-to-moderate level of civic participation among respondents, with the CVI recording a mean of 2.76 ($\sigma = 0.88$) on a five-point scale — a score that falls below the theoretical midpoint of 3.00, indicating that, on average, respondents leaned toward civic disengagement rather than active participation. The highest-performing indicator was awareness of rights and freedoms ($\mu = 3.42$, $\sigma = 0.97$), which, while modest, suggested that constitutional literacy efforts — driven in part by civil society organisations and radio programming — had achieved some penetration. In sharp contrast, the lowest mean was recorded for confidence in government institutions ($\mu = 2.19$, $\sigma = 1.14$), reflecting a deep-seated and pervasive crisis of institutional trust that is well-documented in the Ugandan governance literature. Media access and information use scored a mean of 3.11, signalling that while a majority of respondents had some exposure to information channels, this access did not automatically translate into elevated civic voice — a finding that highlights the distinction between passive information reception and active civic expression. The skewness statistics across all indicators ranged from -0.31 to 0.82, with most indicators exhibiting positive skewness, indicating that distributions were concentrated at the lower end of the Likert scale, confirming that high civic voice was the exception rather than the rule in this sample.

The internal dispersion of responses, captured through standard deviations ranging from 0.97 to 1.21, underscored considerable within-sample heterogeneity in civic engagement, suggesting that civic voice in Uganda is not uniformly suppressed but rather differentially distributed across socio-economic and demographic subgroups — a pattern that the regression and SEM analyses subsequently sought to explain. The near-unity standard deviations across most indicators also implied that the construct of civic voice was not subject to social desirability response bias to an extreme degree, which is noteworthy given the politically sensitive nature of the survey in a context where free expression has historically been constrained. The composite CVI's standard deviation of 0.88 reflected moderate variability, providing sufficient statistical range for regression modelling without floor or ceiling effects. Theoretically, these results align with Gaventa's (2006) Power Cube framework, which posits that civic voice is not merely a function of individual will but is mediated by the spaces, forms, and levels of power that citizens navigate in any given institutional context. In Uganda, as the data suggest, those spaces remain largely closed or invited-only, with the result that the voices of the most marginalised continue to be systematically absent from governance discourse — a finding with profound implications for the quality and inclusivity of democratic governance in the country.

Table 3: Multiple Linear Regression — Predictors of the Civic Voice Index

| Predictor Variable | β (Unstd.) | SE | β^* (Std.) | t-value | p-value | 95% CI |
|-----------------------|------------------|-------|------------------|---------|---------|----------------|
| Education Level | 0.312 | 0.048 | 0.289 | 6.50 | <0.001 | [0.218, 0.406] |
| Age Group | 0.187 | 0.052 | 0.164 | 3.60 | <0.001 | [0.085, 0.289] |
| Access to Information | 0.421 | 0.061 | 0.334 | 6.90 | <0.001 | [0.301, 0.541] |
| Economic Empowerment | 0.276 | 0.059 | 0.214 | 4.68 | <0.001 | [0.160, 0.392] |
| Trust in Institutions | 0.248 | 0.057 | 0.196 | 4.35 | <0.001 | [0.136, 0.360] |
| Community Cohesion | 0.193 | 0.063 | 0.141 | 3.06 | 0.002 | [0.069, 0.317] |

| | | | | | | |
|----------------------|--------|-------|--------|-------|--------|------------------|
| Fear of Reprisal (-) | -0.338 | 0.055 | -0.274 | -6.15 | <0.001 | [-0.446, -0.230] |
|----------------------|--------|-------|--------|-------|--------|------------------|

Note: $R^2 = 0.618$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.609$; $F(7, 392) = 90.44$, $p < 0.001$. Dependent variable: Composite Civic Voice Index (CVI). All VIFs < 3.2 . β^* = Standardised beta coefficient.

The hierarchical multiple linear regression model explained 61.8% of the variance in the Civic Voice Index ($R^2 = 0.618$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.609$, $F(7, 392) = 90.44$, $p < 0.001$), representing a robust and statistically highly significant model fit that confirmed the joint predictive power of the seven independent variables. Among the positive predictors, access to information emerged as the strongest driver of civic voice ($\beta^* = 0.334$, $\beta = 0.421$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that each unit increase in information access was associated with a 0.421-point increase in the CVI after controlling for all other factors. This was closely followed by education level ($\beta^* = 0.289$, $\beta = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$), economic empowerment ($\beta^* = 0.214$, $\beta = 0.276$, $p < 0.001$), and trust in institutions ($\beta^* = 0.196$, $\beta = 0.248$, $p < 0.001$). Community cohesion, while the weakest of the positive predictors, still achieved statistical significance ($\beta^* = 0.141$, $\beta = 0.193$, $p = 0.002$), suggesting that social capital and collective identity do exert an independent, albeit modest, enabling effect on civic voice. Critically, fear of reprisal was the single most powerful suppressor in the model ($\beta^* = -0.274$, $\beta = -0.338$, $p < 0.001$), a finding with profound practical implications — it indicated that even well-educated, well-informed, and economically empowered citizens moderated their civic expression when they perceived a risk of punishment, harassment, or social ostracism for doing so.

The practical significance of these findings extends well beyond the statistical coefficients. The dominance of access to information as a predictor of civic voice lends empirical support to media freedom and digital literacy programmes as primary intervention levers in Uganda — a country where radio reaches over 70% of the rural population but where government-aligned content dominates the airwaves. The strong influence of education, consistent with Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry's (1996) civic voluntarism model and Verba, Scholzman, and Brady's (1995) seminal resource model of participation, reinforces the case for sustained investment in secondary and post-secondary education as a civic infrastructure priority. The inhibitory role of fear of reprisal corroborates qualitative evidence from Amnesty International (2023) and the Uganda Human Rights Commission (2024), which documented widespread self-censorship among ordinary citizens due to perceived surveillance, the criminalisation of protest, and the documented persecution of government critics. The model's high explained variance (61.8%) relative to previous Ugandan-context studies — which rarely exceed 35–40% in analogous analyses — further validates the comprehensiveness of the theoretical framework adopted in this study, which drew on political opportunity theory, the resource model of participation, and the empowerment approach to civic engagement.

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

| SEM Path | Path Coefficient (β) | SE | CR (z) | p-value | Decision |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|-------|--------|---------|-------------------|
| Structural Barriers → Civic Voice | -0.412 | 0.058 | -7.10 | <0.001 | Supported |
| Empowerment Resources → Civic Voice | 0.487 | 0.064 | 7.61 | <0.001 | Supported |
| Institutional Trust → Civic Voice | 0.364 | 0.061 | 5.97 | <0.001 | Supported |
| Empowerment → Institutional Trust | 0.531 | 0.069 | 7.70 | <0.001 | Supported |
| Structural Barriers → Inst. Trust | -0.298 | 0.054 | -5.52 | <0.001 | Supported |
| Mediation: Empow. → Trust → Voice | 0.193 | 0.041 | 4.71 | <0.001 | Partial Mediation |

Note: CFI = 0.963; TLI = 0.951; RMSEA = 0.048 [90% CI: 0.034–0.062]; SRMR = 0.052. Mediation tested via 5,000-sample bootstrapping. CR = Critical Ratio.

The Structural Equation Model yielded excellent model fit indices — CFI = 0.963, TLI = 0.951, RMSEA = 0.048 (90% CI: 0.034–0.062), and SRMR = 0.052 — all of which satisfied the conventional thresholds recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999) for acceptable SEM fit (CFI and TLI > 0.95 ; RMSEA < 0.06 ; SRMR < 0.08), confirming that the hypothesised structural model was an adequate representation of the underlying data-generating process. The path from empowerment resources to civic voice was the strongest in the model ($\beta = 0.487$, CR = 7.61, $p < 0.001$), followed by the path from structural barriers to civic voice ($\beta = -0.412$, CR = -7.10, $p < 0.001$), jointly confirming that civic voice in Uganda is simultaneously pushed down by structural constraints and pulled up by empowerment endowments. Institutional trust demonstrated a significant direct effect on civic voice ($\beta = 0.364$, CR = 5.97, $p < 0.001$), and was itself significantly predicted by both empowerment resources ($\beta = 0.531$, CR = 7.70, $p < 0.001$) and structural barriers ($\beta = -0.298$, CR = -5.52, $p < 0.001$), situating institutional trust as a critical intermediate mechanism in the civic voice production chain. The bootstrapped mediation test confirmed that institutional trust partially mediated the relationship between empowerment resources and civic voice (indirect effect $\beta = 0.193$, 95% BC CI [0.112, 0.279], $p < 0.001$), meaning that empowerment not only directly enhanced civic voice but also did so indirectly by first building citizens' trust in institutional frameworks, which in turn emboldened their willingness to speak.

The SEM findings represent the most analytically sophisticated contribution of this study and carry important theoretical and policy implications. The partial mediation finding — wherein institutional trust explained a portion but not the entirety of the empowerment-to-civic-voice relationship — suggested that empowerment had both a direct psychological effect (raising citizens' sense of efficacy and entitlement to speak) and an institutional pathway (improving citizens' perceptions of governance responsiveness, thereby reducing perceived costs of civic expression). This dual mechanism is theoretically consistent with Bandura's (1986) self-efficacy theory and Putnam's (1993) social capital framework, which together predict that civic engagement flourishes when individuals possess both the internal resources and the external institutional confidence to participate. The model's confirmation that structural barriers — capturing dimensions of poverty, physical inaccessibility of governance institutions, and legal/regulatory restrictions on assembly — exerted the largest suppressive effect ($\beta = -0.412$) reinforced the neo-structural argument that civic silence in Uganda is, above all, a structural phenomenon rather than a purely attitudinal or motivational one. Policy interventions that focus solely on raising civic awareness or motivation without addressing the material and institutional conditions that constrain participation are therefore unlikely to produce durable improvements in civic voice levels — a finding that should fundamentally reorient the design logic of governance reform programmes in Uganda and comparable sub-Saharan African contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate the persistent paradox of civic silence in Uganda — a country with formal democratic institutions yet structurally suppressed civic voice — and succeeded in providing a statistically rigorous, multi-layered account of the forces that determine whether marginalised communities speak or remain silent. The findings, derived from a representative sample of 400 respondents across five districts and analysed through univariate, bivariate, multiple regression, and Structural Equation Modelling frameworks, converged on a clear and sobering picture: civic voice in Uganda is not naturally absent but is systematically suppressed by an interlocking matrix of structural barriers — including poverty, physical exclusion, and legal restrictions — institutional distrust, and the ever-present shadow of fear of reprisal. The composite Civic Voice Index mean of 2.76 out of 5.00 encapsulates this reality with stark numerical clarity. Equally, the results offered a path forward: access to information, education, economic empowerment, community cohesion, and institutional trust were all confirmed as significant, independent enablers of civic voice, and the SEM analysis demonstrated that empowerment resources, working both directly and through the mediating channel of institutional trust, constituted the strongest positive force in the civic voice production chain. These findings have immediate relevance for governance reformers, civil society actors, and development partners working in Uganda and across the broader region — confirming that the road to a society where the voiceless finally find and freely exercise their voice runs squarely through the terrain of structural empowerment, institutional accountability, and an enabling environment for free expression.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthen multi-channel information access and digital literacy: Given that access to information was the strongest predictor of civic voice ($\beta^* = 0.334$), the Government of Uganda and development partners should invest in expanding community radio, television, and mobile-based civic information platforms in underserved rural and peri-urban areas, while simultaneously integrating civic education — including knowledge of constitutional rights, complaint mechanisms, and local governance structures — into the secondary and post-secondary education curricula and community outreach programmes.

Dismantle structural barriers through targeted economic and legal empowerment: Since structural barriers exerted the largest suppressive effect on civic voice in the SEM model ($\beta = -0.412$), policymakers must pursue integrated programmes that simultaneously address poverty — through social protection schemes, livelihood support, and microfinance — and legal/regulatory restrictions on civil assembly and expression, including the review and reform of legislation that criminalises peaceful protest and restricts civil society operations in Uganda.

Rebuild institutional trust through transparent, accountable, and responsive governance: The partial mediation of institutional trust in the empowerment-civic voice pathway underscores that sustainable civic engagement requires citizens not only to be empowered but to believe that their voice will be heard and acted upon. Local governments, the Electoral Commission, and anti-corruption bodies should therefore implement visible accountability mechanisms — including publicised budget tracking, citizen report cards, and open participatory planning processes — to demonstrably demonstrate responsiveness and thereby rebuild the institutional trust that is currently the most critically missing ingredient in Uganda's civic ecosystem.

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