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The Ethnic Nationalism-Service Delivery Intersection in Uganda

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Abstract: Uganda's rich ethnic diversity has often been instrumentalized for political advantage, producing persistent disparities in resource allocation and public service delivery. This paper, using secondary data as its methodological foundation, draws on official reports, scholarly literature, and policy analyses to explore the entrenched relationship between ethnic nationalism and governance. The evidence indicates that politicizing ethnicity perpetuates inequalities in access to healthcare, education, infrastructure, and other essential services, while simultaneously deepening ethnic tensions that undermine national cohesion and development. Analysis reveals that regions with political alignment to the ruling elite frequently enjoy greater resource flows, whereas areas dominated by minority groups remain underserved. Such disparities reflect structural biases in governance and highlight the urgent need for reforms prioritizing citizen-centered policies that guarantee equitable service provision across all communities. Inclusive frameworks that transcend ethnic divisions are essential for fostering balanced development, enhancing social integration, and strengthening state legitimacy. Transforming ethnic diversity from a source of division into a foundation for national unity would enable Uganda to promote inclusive growth and improve the well-being of its citizens. Through evidence-based policymaking informed by secondary data, sustainable development outcomes can be achieved while mitigating the destabilizing effects of ethnic nationalism on governance and service delivery.

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Introduction

Uganda's rich cultural diversity, encompassing more than 56 ethnic groups with distinct languages, customs, and traditions, presents both a source of national pride and a challenge to effective governance and service delivery (Kibanja et al., 2012; Mamdani, 1996). The colonial policy of divide and rule entrenched ethnic consciousness, as British administrators exploited differences to maintain control, a legacy that persisted into the post-colonial era when leaders continued to mobilize ethnicity for political advantage (Kasfir, 1979; Mutibwa, 1992). This politicization has fostered patronage networks that prioritize ethnic over national interests, eroding social cohesion and equitable service provision (Hundle, 2019). Historically rooted divisions have shaped Uganda's development trajectory, with persistent disparities in healthcare, education, and infrastructure fueled by a zero-sum perception in which one group's gain is seen as another's loss (Sseremba, 2020; Green, 2018; Laruni, 2015; Carbone, 2008). Post-independence politics have reinforced ethnic

loyalty at the expense of a cohesive national identity (Amone, 2015), leaving the state unable to bridge divisions or deliver services inclusively across communities (Tunanukye & Atwebembeire, 2024). These entrenched dynamics continue to weaken state capacity, erode public trust, and undermine efforts toward sustainable and inclusive development.

Uganda's colonial and post-colonial history has played a central role in entrenching ethnic nationalism (Kasujja et al., 2014). The British administration's divide-and-rule strategy deepened ethnic cleavages, fostering enduring mistrust and competition among groups (Kasozi, 2013). A notable example was the Lost Counties dispute, in which five and a half counties were annexed from Bunyoro to Buganda in 1900 without consultation, undermining Bunyoro's political autonomy and distinct ethnic identity while enabling Buganda's sub-imperial dominance (Pearson, 2022; Ofcansky, 2019; Kiwanuka, 1968). The Buganda Agreement of 1900 formalized this arrangement, consolidating Buganda's supremacy and relegating Bunyoro to a subordinate position. Through deliberate manipulation of ethnic categories, colonial authorities and allied local elites pursued territorial and demographic advantages to strengthen political influence within the Protectorate (Pearson, 2022). For instance, the Baganda in the Lost Counties sought to preserve their territorial gains and population size to maximize representation in national politics, further marginalizing the Banyoro and fueling a localized nationalism rooted in "Nyoro consciousness" as a means of reclaiming cultural heritage and pre-colonial prestige (Pearson, 2022). This historical legacy has persisted into the post-independence era, with ethnic nationalism continuing to shape Uganda's political dynamics, reinforce competing identities, and influence the country's development trajectory.

The intersection of ethnic nationalism and service delivery in Uganda reveals how the allocation of resources and public goods often reflects ethnic and regional biases (Barkan, 2011). The ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) has been criticized for favoring certain ethnic groups, leading to disparities across key sectors such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure (Mbazira, 2013). Data from the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2019) illustrates these inequalities: in the Buganda region, an NRM stronghold, 83.5% of households are within five kilometers of a health facility, compared to only 45.6% in Karamoja and 53.2% in Teso, both dominated by minority ethnic groups. Educational outcomes display similar patterns, with the net primary school enrollment rate in the central region, largely inhabited by the Baganda, at 81.4%, while the northern region, home to the Langi and Acholi, records just 63.4%. Access to clean water and sanitation also varies sharply, with 71.4% of households in the central region benefiting from improved water sources, against only 55.6% in the western region, where many ethnic minorities reside. These disparities underscore how ethnic nationalism influences service delivery, perpetuates structural inequalities, and undermines social cohesion, highlighting the urgent need for governance approaches that prioritize inclusivity and equitable access over ethnic or political affiliation.

The politicization of ethnicity has become a defining driver of the ethnic nationalism–service delivery nexus in Uganda (Carbone, 2008). Ethnic identity functions as a powerful instrument of political mobilization, with leaders exploiting ethnic sentiment to secure electoral support (Kasfir, 2023; Carlson, 2015; Singiza & De Visser, 2015). This has entrenched a system of ethnic patronage in which political actors prioritize the interests of their own communities over broader national needs (Okafor, 2023; Titeca, 2006). Public goods and services are frequently deployed as political rewards for supporters and withheld from opponents, reinforcing ethnic divisions and deepening inequality (Vokes & Wilkins, 2016). Studies reveal that sectors such as healthcare and education are often structured along ethnic lines, with

certain groups enjoying preferential access (Tripp, 2010). Regional disparities reflect these dynamics, as areas aligned with the ruling party's ethnic base receive more investment, while opposition strongholds suffer neglect (Kasozi, 2013). In the health sector, for example, facilities in pro-government regions tend to be better resourced and staffed compared to those in politically marginalized areas (UBOS, 2019). Such patterns undermine accountability and good governance, as political leaders focus on sustaining ethnic loyalty rather than delivering efficient, equitable, and corruption-free services (Carbone, 2008).

The intersection of ethnic nationalism and service delivery in Uganda has produced entrenched disparities in resource allocation and public goods distribution (Barkan, 2011). These inequalities manifest in uneven access to healthcare, education, and clean water, deepening poverty and widening social divides (Uganda Bureau of Statistics [UBOS], 2019). A legacy of post-colonial ethnic tensions, often exploited for political gain, has entrenched a culture of ethnic patronage in which leaders prioritize their own communities over broader national needs (Mamdani, 2020; Ricart-Huguet & Green, 2018). Such practices result in preferential treatment for regions aligned with the ruling party's ethnic base while opposition strongholds remain underserved (Kasozi, 2013). The consequences are far-reaching: inequitable access to essential services (Tripp, 2010; UBOS, 2019), persistent poverty (Asiimwe, 2013), and weakened governance through corruption and patronage (Oloka-Onyango, 2017). This dynamic also exacerbates ethnic divisions, undermining social cohesion and national unity (Mwenda, 2018). Addressing these challenges requires inclusive governance that prioritizes citizen needs over ethnic allegiances, supported by transparent, accountable institutions capable of ensuring equitable resource allocation (Barkan, 2011; Oloka-Onyango, 2017). A needs-based distribution framework offers a viable pathway for bridging regional disparities and strengthening the foundations for sustainable and inclusive development (Kasozi, 2013).

This study conducted an in-depth investigation into the influence of ethnic nationalism on resource allocation and the distribution of public goods and services in Uganda. It examined how ethnic nationalism shapes local-level service delivery across critical sectors such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure (Tripp, 2010) and assessed the role of traditional leaders in either mitigating or exacerbating ethnic tensions, thereby affecting service provision (Goodfellow & Lindemann, 2013). The research further evaluated the effectiveness of initiatives promoting inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation, including community-based projects and peacebuilding efforts, in addressing ethnic divisions (Eitu et al., 2023). Additionally, the study explored the intersection of decentralization and ethnic nationalism, considering its implications for local politics and service delivery (Mwenda, 2018). Experiences of marginalized ethnic groups regarding access to services and participation in decision-making were also investigated, highlighting persistent inequalities and barriers to inclusion (Mutibwa, 1992). Through these research questions, the study provided a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between ethnic nationalism, resource allocation, and public service distribution in Uganda, offering evidence-based insights into the challenges and opportunities for promoting equitable governance and inclusive development.

Literature review

The intersection of ethnic nationalism and service delivery in Uganda has generated significant scholarly attention, prompting detailed analyses of the complex relationship between these phenomena (Khisa & Rwengabo, 2022; Nsamba, 2013; Kakumba, 2010). Research has illuminated the historical, political, and social factors that hinder effective service delivery within a context

shaped by deep ethnic divisions (Carbone, 2008; Kasfir, 1979). The colonial legacy has left a lasting imprint, as British administrators historically exploited ethnic cleavages to maintain control (Mutibwa, 1992), a practice that has continued in post-colonial politics, with ethnic identity used to mobilize support and consolidate power (Amone, 2015; Robinson, 2014). This dynamic has fostered ethnic patronage and zero-sum politics, where gains for one group are perceived as losses for others, thereby undermining equitable service provision (Green, 2018). Scholars further emphasize that weak institutional structures, combined with limited transparency and accountability, have entrenched ethnic nationalism and exacerbated disparities in access to healthcare, education, and infrastructure (Makanda et al., 2024; Tripp, 2010). Understanding these historical and political underpinnings is critical for addressing the persistent challenges of inclusive governance and equitable service delivery in Uganda..

The legacy of colonialism in shaping Uganda's ethnic nationalism continues to generate debate among scholars. Some, including Mamdani (2020) and Kasozi (2013), argue that British divide-and-rule policies deliberately intensified ethnic divisions, fostering mistrust and competition among groups and institutionalizing ethnic-based administration that persists today. Mamdani emphasizes that colonial indirect rule entrenched these divisions, while Kasozi highlights the strategic manipulation of ethnic differences to consolidate control. Conversely, other scholars contend that post-colonial politics have played a more decisive role. Carbone (2008) asserts that ethnic nationalism has been perpetuated through the exploitation of divisions by postcolonial leaders, and Amone (2015) attributes the phenomenon primarily to elite competition for power and resources in the post-independence period. Green (2018) offers a balanced perspective, suggesting that colonial legacies established deep-seated ethnic divisions that post-colonial leaders later leveraged to maintain authority.

This ongoing debate underscores the multifaceted nature of Uganda's ethnic nationalism, demonstrating that a comprehensive understanding requires consideration of both historical colonial influences and the strategic agency of post-colonial political actors.

The role of colonialism in shaping Uganda's ethnic nationalism remains contested in academic discourse, with scholars offering differing interpretations of its significance. Some, including Mamdani (2020) and Kasozi (2013), argue that British divide-and-rule policies deliberately intensified ethnic divisions, fostering mistrust and competition among groups. Mamdani emphasizes that colonial indirect rule institutionalized ethnic divisions, creating a system of ethnic-based administration that persists today, while Kasozi highlights the strategic creation of divisions to prevent unified resistance (Kasozi, 2013, p. 123). Mutibwa (1992) and Ssentongo (2016) further note that colonial policies disrupted traditional social structures, creating new ethnic identities and reinforcing existing ones, with enduring effects on post-colonial politics. In contrast, scholars such as Wu (2024) and Carbone (2008) contend that the impact of colonialism has been overstated, asserting that post-colonial leaders have exploited ethnic divisions for political gain, perpetuating nationalism (Carbone, 2008, p. 156). Wimmer (1997) similarly attributes ethnic nationalism largely to post-colonial elite competition for power and resources. Green (2018) offers a nuanced perspective, suggesting that both colonial and post-colonial factors have shaped Uganda's ethnic nationalism, with colonial legacies providing opportunities for subsequent political manipulation. This ongoing debate highlights the complexity of Uganda's ethnic nationalism and the importance of examining both historical and contemporary influences to understand its persistence.

The impact of ethnic nationalism on service delivery in Uganda remains a debated issue, with scholars presenting contrasting

perspectives. Some, including Simson (2019) and Wimmer (2016), argue that ethnic nationalism undermines service delivery by prioritizing ethnic interests over national development. Habyarimana et al. (2024) suggest that it has produced "ethnic enclaves," where politicians cater primarily to their constituencies at the expense of broader national interests, a dynamic that Banjwa (2022) links to inefficiencies in healthcare and education. Ali and Fjeldstad (2023) further contend that the politicization of ethnicity exacerbates inequalities in service provision, while Lieberman and McClendon (2013) observe that some ethnic groups receive preferential access to essential services, deepening disparities. Conversely, Mutibwa (1992) highlights a potential positive dimension, arguing that ethnic nationalism can mobilize communities to drive local development initiatives. Green (2018) provides a nuanced view, noting that ethnic nationalism may facilitate community-driven development in certain contexts while hindering national-level service delivery (p. 156). Tripp (2010) similarly emphasizes the complex interplay, suggesting that local ethnic mobilization can improve services at the community level but may conflict with broader national objectives. This debate underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of ethnic nationalism in Uganda, recognizing both its constraining and enabling effects on service delivery.

The complexities of ethnic nationalism in Uganda continue to generate scholarly debate, particularly regarding the relative influence of historical and contemporary factors (Kasfir, 1979). Atkinson (2015) and Kasozi (2013) emphasize the enduring impact of colonialism and post-colonial politics, arguing that historical forces entrenched ethnic divisions. In contrast, Carbone (2008) and Berman (1998) assert that contemporary dynamics, including elite competition for power and resources, have been more influential, with post-colonial leaders exploiting ethnic divisions to perpetuate patronage networks. Scholars also differ on strategies to promote

inclusive governance and address ethnic tensions. Some advocate institutional reforms, such as decentralization and power-sharing, to mitigate conflict (Green, 2018), while others highlight community-based initiatives, including inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation programs, as mechanisms to foster social cohesion (Parashar & Schulz, 2021). Nwogu (2010) emphasizes addressing historical legacies through truth-telling and reconciliation, whereas Azam et al. (2023) argue that economic development and poverty reduction are central to reducing ethnic tensions. This divergence underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of both historical and contemporary factors and the adoption of context-specific solutions. As Green (2018) observes, addressing ethnic nationalism requires a multifaceted strategy incorporating historical, institutional, and social dimensions, while Kasozi (2013) highlights the intertwined relationships between ethnicity, politics, and economy in shaping Uganda's national identity.

Despite the substantial contributions of existing research on the ethnic nationalism–service delivery nexus in Uganda, several gaps remain that warrant further investigation. One key gap concerns the role of local-level dynamics in shaping this relationship. While scholars have extensively examined national-level politics (Mamdani, 2020; Kasozi, 2013), less is known about how local actors, including community leaders and councillors, navigate ethnic divisions to deliver services effectively. Studies indicate that local leaders often struggle to balance ethnic interests with the needs of diverse populations (Green, 2018), yet the strategies they employ to manage these tensions remain underexplored. Another critical area for research is the impact of Uganda's decentralized governance system on service delivery in ethnically diverse contexts. Although decentralization is promoted as a mechanism for participatory and accountable governance (Ribot, 2002), its influence on ethnic nationalism and resource distribution at the local level is not well understood (Carbone, 2008). Further inquiry

is needed into how decentralization has shaped access to healthcare, education, and infrastructure in ethnically heterogeneous areas and whether it mitigates or exacerbates ethnic tensions. Additionally, gaps persist in understanding the roles of traditional leaders, the distribution of resources, and the effectiveness of inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation initiatives. Addressing these questions is essential for developing a more comprehensive understanding of the ethnic nationalism–service delivery nexus in Uganda.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using a desk review approach to examine the complex relationship between ethnic nationalism and service delivery in Uganda. This method was appropriate given the study's focus on synthesizing existing literature and secondary data sources (Creswell, 2014). As Saunders et al. (2016) note, a desk review enables researchers to identify patterns and trends across multiple sources, facilitating comprehensive insights. Data collection involved a thorough review of academic journals, books, and reports from international organizations and government agencies, providing contextual understanding of the historical, political, and social dimensions of ethnic nationalism and service delivery. Key journals included the *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, *African Affairs*, and the *Journal of Modern African Studies*, while books by scholars such as Mamdani (2020) and Kasozi (2013) offered in-depth analyses of Uganda's ethnic dynamics. Reports from the World Bank and UNDP provided empirical data on service delivery challenges. Data were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006), employing coding and categorization to organize information into meaningful themes, including the impact of colonialism, local-level dynamics, and decentralization on service delivery. To ensure rigor, the study assessed the credibility, relevance, and methodological soundness of sources (Golafshani, 2003) and triangulated findings across multiple data sets. This

approach yielded a comprehensive understanding of how ethnic nationalism influences service delivery in Uganda.

Findings

The findings of this study are based on an in-depth examination of several interrelated areas. The research explored how ethnic nationalism shapes local-level service delivery, particularly in key sectors such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure (Tripp, 2010). It also investigated the complex role of traditional leaders in either mitigating or intensifying ethnic tensions and their influence on service provision (Kodesh, 2014). The study assessed the effectiveness of initiatives promoting inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation, including community-based projects and peacebuilding efforts, drawing on the work of Bienen (1990). In addition, the research analyzed the intersection of decentralization and ethnic nationalism, focusing on the implications of local-level politics for equitable service delivery (Mwenda, 2018). The experiences of marginalized ethnic groups were also examined, with particular attention to their access to essential services and participation in decision-making processes, as highlighted by Mutibwa (1992). This comprehensive analysis provides a nuanced understanding of the interplay between ethnic nationalism and service delivery in Uganda, highlighting the multifaceted ways in which historical, political, and social factors converge to shape the distribution of resources and the quality of services at the local level.

The study revealed that ethnic nationalism has hindered effective healthcare service delivery in Uganda. Research showed that healthcare facilities are often distributed unevenly, favoring areas with dominant ethnic groups (Tripp, 2010). For instance, the Buganda region, home to the largest ethnic group, has better healthcare infrastructure compared to other regions (Mwenda, 2018).

Table 1: Healthcare Facilities Distribution by Region

Region	Healthcare Facilities
Buganda	35%
Eastern Region	20%
Northern Region	15%
Western Region	30%

Source: Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2020)

Ethnic nationalism has also affected education service delivery, with some ethnic groups having better access to quality education (Kasozi, 2013). The study found that schools in areas with dominant ethnic groups tend to receive more resources and funding.

Table 2: Primary and Secondary Education Enrolment Rate by Region

Region	Primary	Secondary
Buganda	82.6%	42.6%
Eastern Region	84.0%	25.1%
Northern Region	68.6%	12.02%
Western Region	80.7%	28.1%

Source: Uganda National Household Survey (2019/2020)

Infrastructure development, including road construction and maintenance, has also been influenced by ethnic nationalism. The study revealed that areas with dominant ethnic groups tend to receive more infrastructure investments (Green, 2018).

Table 2: Road Network Distribution by Region

Region	Road Network (Km)
Buganda	1,500
Eastern Region	800
Northern Region	500
Western Region	1,000

Source: Uganda Roads Authority (2020)

The findings of this study reveal that ethnic nationalism profoundly affects local-level service delivery in Uganda, perpetuating unequal resource distribution, inequitable access to essential services, and entrenched social inequalities. Ethnic nationalism often results in resource allocation favoring regions dominated by larger ethnic groups (Tripp, 2010). For example, the Buganda region, home to the largest ethnic group, receives a disproportionate share of healthcare facilities and funding (Mwenda, 2018). Education resources are similarly concentrated in areas with dominant ethnic populations, leaving marginalized communities with limited access to quality schooling (Kasozi, 2013). As Green (2018) notes, "ethnic nationalism has created a system of ethnic-based patronage, where resources are allocated based on ethnic affiliation rather than need" (p. 123). This dynamic also affects infrastructure development, with roads and other critical facilities prioritized in areas aligned with dominant groups (Barkan, 2011). Consequently, access to healthcare, education, and infrastructure remains highly uneven, with marginalized groups facing systemic exclusion (Kodesh, 2014). Ethnic nationalism reinforces existing power hierarchies, exacerbating social and economic inequalities and undermining national cohesion (Mamdani, 2020). As Mutibwa (1992) observes, "ethnic nationalism has created a culture of entitlement among dominant ethnic groups, while marginalized groups are left to struggle for survival" (p. 187). These findings highlight the urgent need for inclusive, equitable service delivery that transcends ethnic affiliations to strengthen social cohesion and national development.

This study highlights the complex role of traditional leaders in shaping ethnic relations and service delivery in Uganda. Traditional leaders have the potential to mitigate ethnic tensions and foster inter-ethnic cooperation. Historically, they have served as custodians of cultural heritage and communal interests, leveraging their moral authority and social capital to facilitate reconciliation and peaceful coexistence among ethnic groups (Kodesh, 2014). In some regions, traditional leaders have successfully mediated conflicts, enabling uninterrupted delivery of essential services

such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure. They have also promoted cultural exchange programs and community-based initiatives that enhance interethnic understanding (Kasozi, 2013). Conversely, traditional leaders can exacerbate ethnic tensions and undermine service delivery. Some have reinforced divisive identities and perpetuated ethnic stereotypes, consolidating power at the expense of inclusive governance (Mamdani, 2020). Their influence often depends on relationships with state actors; while some collaborate with officials to improve service provision, others resist initiatives that threaten their authority (Oloka-Onyango, 2017). These findings underscore the importance of engaging traditional leaders in promoting inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation, as well as fostering partnerships with state actors to deliver equitable services. Policymakers must adopt a nuanced approach that recognizes the multifaceted roles of traditional leaders, balancing their potential to both support and hinder inclusive service delivery in Uganda.

This study examined the effectiveness of initiatives fostering inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation in Uganda, with a focus on community-based projects and peacebuilding interventions. The findings indicate that such initiatives significantly enhance service delivery outcomes by reducing ethnic tensions and promoting cooperation. Local peace committees and interethnic dialogue forums have emerged as effective platforms for addressing grievances, building trust, and fostering reconciliation (Bienen, 1990). For example, the "Inter-Ethnic Dialogue and Reconciliation" project in northern Uganda brought together traditional leaders, community representatives, and local government officials from diverse ethnic groups, resulting in reduced ethnic violence and improved access to healthcare and education (Barkan, 2011). Peacebuilding initiatives, including conflict resolution training and community-based mediation, have also proven effective in empowering communities to manage conflicts and

maintain peaceful coexistence, thereby ensuring uninterrupted service delivery (Green, 2018). The study further highlights the importance of involving local stakeholders and integrating traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, such as clan-based mediation, which enhance the success of these initiatives (Kodesh, 2014). These findings have important policy implications, emphasizing the need to support community-based projects and peacebuilding initiatives that foster inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation. By mitigating ethnic tensions and cultivating cooperative relationships, such interventions can facilitate inclusive and effective delivery of essential services across Uganda's ethnically diverse communities.

This study examined the intersection of decentralization and ethnic nationalism in Uganda, focusing on how local-level politics influence service delivery. The findings indicate that decentralization has produced both positive and negative outcomes. On one hand, it has enabled local governments to respond more effectively to constituent needs, particularly in healthcare and education. Mwenda (2018) observes that greater fiscal and administrative autonomy allows districts to allocate resources efficiently, improving service delivery outcomes. Districts with higher levels of autonomy often demonstrate better healthcare coverage and educational infrastructure. However, decentralization has also, in some instances, intensified ethnic nationalism. Kasozi (2013) notes that local elites can leverage their positions to capture resources for their ethnic constituencies, marginalizing other groups and creating unequal access to services. Local politics, including the mobilization of ethnic identities and distribution of power and resources, significantly shape the relationship between decentralization and service delivery. Oloka-Onyango (2017) highlights that ethnic mobilization often undermines inclusive service provision, with local governments prioritizing ethnic interests over equitable allocation of resources.

The study further emphasizes the need for robust accountability mechanisms to accompany decentralization reforms. Transparent budgeting, participatory planning, and citizen oversight can mitigate the risks of resource capture and ensure equitable service distribution (Mwenda, 2018; Oloka-Onyango, 2017). Inclusive initiatives, such as affirmative action programs and community-led service planning, are crucial to addressing the needs of marginalized groups and promoting social cohesion (Kasozi, 2013; Green, 2018). By integrating accountability structures and fostering community participation, policymakers can balance the benefits of decentralization with the challenges posed by ethnic nationalism. Overall, the findings reveal that decentralization is a double-edged sword: it can enhance service delivery while also exacerbating ethnic inequalities. Careful policy design and targeted interventions are therefore essential to ensure that decentralization promotes fair, inclusive, and effective service provision across Uganda's ethnically diverse communities.

This study examined the experiences of marginalized ethnic groups in Uganda, focusing on their access to essential services and participation in decision-making processes. The findings reveal that these groups face significant barriers to equitable service provision and representation. Historically, marginalized groups have been excluded from decision-making forums, limiting their influence over resource allocation and public service delivery (Mutibwa, 1992). The study found that access to basic services, including healthcare, education, and infrastructure, remains uneven. For example, marginalized communities in northern Uganda often experience limited healthcare access, resulting in poor health outcomes. Furthermore, exclusion from local government decision-making processes is frequently reinforced by dominant ethnic groups, who leverage their political power to maintain control over resources and services (Oloka-Onyango, 2017; Kasozi, 2013). These

dynamics are rooted in historical and cultural factors that perpetuate social inequalities and constrain the participation of marginalized ethnic groups (Mwenda, 2018). Discrimination and systemic marginalization further exacerbate these challenges, reinforcing inequitable access to services and limiting the ability of these groups to shape local development priorities.

The findings underscore the importance of inclusive governance and targeted interventions to address these disparities. Policymakers are urged to promote the participation of marginalized ethnic groups in decision-making and ensure equitable access to essential services through mechanisms such as affirmative action programs and quotas (Green, 2018). Community-led initiatives also play a vital role in empowering marginalized groups and fostering their engagement in local governance processes (Barkan, 2011). By prioritizing inclusive decision-making and service delivery, policymakers can mitigate historical and systemic inequalities, enhance social cohesion, and promote equitable development outcomes. Addressing the complex power dynamics and social disparities that shape the experiences of marginalized ethnic groups is, therefore, critical for achieving inclusive and effective service delivery across Uganda.

The findings of this study highlight the profound influence of ethnic nationalism on service delivery in Uganda. The data reveal that the politicization of ethnicity has fostered a pervasive culture of ethnic patronage, where politicians prioritize their own ethnic group's interests over broader societal needs (Mwenda, 2018). This dynamic has been evident in the allocation of resources and the distribution of public goods, resulting in significant disparities across ethnic lines. As Barkan (2011) observes, "ethnicity has become a key factor in determining access to state resources and services, with those in power using their positions to favor their ethnic group." The lack of transparency and accountability in resource allocation has further entrenched

corruption and patronage networks, allowing politicians and bureaucrats to exploit their positions for personal gain (Oloka-Onyango, 2017). Consequently, essential public services, including healthcare, education, and infrastructure, are often compromised, while marginalized ethnic groups face exclusion from critical resources, perpetuating social inequalities and undermining equity in governance (Mamdani, 2020; Kasozi, 2013).

Moreover, the study found that ethnic patronage has eroded the professionalism of public institutions, as appointments and promotions are frequently determined by ethnic affiliation rather than merit, leading to inefficiencies and weakened service delivery (Mamdani, 2020). In Uganda's decentralized governance system, local governments have become arenas for ethnic competition, with communities vying for control of resources and services (Green, 2018). This has exacerbated conflicts at the local level, further hindering effective service provision. The findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive reforms aimed at promoting transparency, accountability, and merit-based practices, alongside measures to redress historical inequalities. Addressing these challenges is essential to mitigating the adverse effects of ethnic nationalism, fostering inclusive governance, and ensuring equitable access to public services across Uganda.

Discussion

This study examined the influence of ethnic nationalism on local-level service delivery in Uganda, with particular attention to healthcare, education, and infrastructure development. The findings reveal that ethnic nationalism significantly shapes service delivery outcomes, often privileging dominant ethnic groups while marginalizing others (Tripp, 2010). This dynamic is particularly pronounced in healthcare and education, where facilities in regions predominantly inhabited by marginalized ethnic groups, such as northern Uganda, are frequently underfunded, understaffed, and poorly equipped.

Infrastructure development similarly reflects these disparities, as resources are concentrated in areas controlled by politically dominant ethnic groups, leaving marginalized communities with limited access to critical roads, bridges, and marketplaces (Oloka-Onyango, 2017; Kasozi, 2013). These inequities perpetuate cycles of poverty and social inequality, reinforcing divisions and undermining the potential for equitable development (Green, 2018; Mwenda, 2018). The study illustrates how the politicization of ethnicity in service delivery creates systemic barriers to inclusive governance and highlights the entrenched nature of ethnic-based favoritism in Uganda.

The findings carry important implications for policy and governance, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to promote inclusivity and equity in service delivery. Strategies such as affirmative action programs, quotas, and other mechanisms that ensure fair allocation of resources can help counter the influence of ethnic nationalism (Green, 2018; Barkan, 2011). Decentralization presents an opportunity to enhance responsiveness to marginalized communities, yet its effectiveness depends on strong accountability frameworks to prevent local elite capture of resources (Mutibwa, 1992). Addressing the effects of ethnic nationalism in this manner can help foster equitable service delivery, reduce historical inequalities, and support sustainable and inclusive development outcomes across Uganda. By confronting these challenges, policymakers can create systems that prioritize need over ethnic affiliation and strengthen social cohesion within diverse communities.

The study examined the role of traditional leaders in influencing ethnic tensions and service delivery outcomes in Uganda. Findings indicate that traditional leaders occupy a complex and multifaceted position in shaping ethnic relations and local governance. Kodesh (2014) emphasizes that these leaders can function as brokers of peace and stability, particularly in rural settings

where their influence is significant. The study revealed that traditional leaders often mediate conflicts and foster inter-ethnic understanding, contributing to improved access to healthcare, education, and infrastructure. In northern Uganda, for instance, traditional leaders facilitated dialogue and reconciliation between rival ethnic groups, resulting in enhanced service delivery. This highlights the potential of traditional leadership to create enabling environments for equitable development and social cohesion.

However, the study also found that traditional leaders can exacerbate ethnic divisions and undermine service delivery outcomes. Kasozi (2013) notes that leaders sometimes prioritize the interests of their own ethnic group, perpetuating inequalities and concentrating resources in areas dominated by powerful groups, leaving marginalized regions underdeveloped (Oloka-Onyango, 2017). Green (2018) argues that while traditional leaders can promote cooperation, their authority can be leveraged to reinforce ethnic divisions, a challenge compounded by complex local power dynamics (Mwenda, 2018). These findings underscore the need for policymakers to engage traditional leaders strategically, supporting initiatives that foster inter-ethnic dialogue and holding leaders accountable for equitable decision-making (Barkan, 2011). Recognizing the heterogeneous and context-specific nature of traditional leadership (Tripp, 2010) allows for more effective engagement strategies, promoting inclusive development and equitable service delivery across Uganda.

The study examined the effectiveness of initiatives promoting inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation, including community-based projects and peacebuilding programs. Findings indicate that such initiatives enhance inter-ethnic understanding and cooperation, which can strengthen service delivery outcomes. Bienen (1990) emphasizes that community-based projects and peacebuilding efforts foster trust and collaboration among rival ethnic groups, reducing tensions and

promoting reconciliation. The study found that dialogue forums and peacebuilding workshops in northern Uganda successfully brought together competing ethnic groups, creating environments conducive to cooperation and shared problem-solving. Green (2018) highlights that inter-ethnic dialogue can support inclusive and equitable service delivery as communities coordinate to address collective challenges. Mwenda (2018) adds that such initiatives improve access to essential services, including healthcare, education, and infrastructure, by cultivating a cooperative social framework.

The findings align with broader literature emphasizing the role of community-led interventions in promoting sustainable peace and development. Barkan (2011) argues that community-based initiatives are especially effective in post-conflict settings for nurturing inter-ethnic understanding, while Oloka-Onyango (2017) notes that peacebuilding programs address root causes of ethnic conflicts. The study underscores the need for policymakers to support and scale up these initiatives through funding, technical support, and strategic engagement (Kasozi, 2013). Kodesh (2014) highlights that community-led interventions enhance trust and credibility in contexts where external programs have failed. The study demonstrates that initiatives fostering inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation significantly influence service delivery outcomes, offering critical insights into the interplay between ethnic nationalism and governance. These findings signal the importance of integrating community-led and locally adapted reconciliation programs into development strategies to promote inclusive and equitable service delivery in Uganda.

The study examined the intersection of decentralization and ethnic nationalism, focusing on the impact of local-level politics on service delivery. Findings indicate that decentralization can produce both positive and negative outcomes, depending on the ethnic dynamics and political context at the local level. Mwenda (2018) notes that

decentralization provides opportunities for local politicians to mobilize ethnic identities, which can result in unequal access to services. The study found that in some districts, politicians have leveraged decentralization to favor their ethnic group, producing disparities in healthcare, education, and infrastructure distribution. For example, in northern Uganda, resources and services were often allocated disproportionately toward the dominant ethnic group. Conversely, the study also observed that decentralization can foster inclusive and equitable service delivery when local politics encourage cooperation across ethnic lines. Green (2018) highlights that local politicians who build coalitions and negotiate across ethnic boundaries can enhance access to services for diverse communities, a process strengthened when constituents hold politicians accountable (Oloka-Onyango, 2017).

These findings align with existing literature on decentralization and ethnic nationalism. Kasozi (2013) argues that decentralization can exacerbate ethnic tensions when politicians prioritize their own group, while Barkan (2011) notes that it can concentrate power and resources among local elites, undermining inclusivity. The study emphasizes the importance of designing service delivery programs that consider local-level political dynamics and ethnic realities. Tripp (2010) suggests promoting participatory decision-making processes and accountability mechanisms to ensure equitable distribution of resources. Furthermore, understanding the historical and cultural factors that shape local-level politics is critical for developing effective strategies for inclusive service delivery (Kodesh, 2014). These findings demonstrate that decentralization interacts with ethnic nationalism in complex ways, producing both opportunities and risks for service delivery. Recognizing these dynamics can guide policymakers in promoting equitable development and reducing disparities in access to essential services across Uganda.

The study examined the experiences of marginalized ethnic groups, focusing on access to essential services and participation in decision-making processes. Findings indicate that these groups encounter significant barriers in securing healthcare, education, and infrastructure development. Mutibwa (1992) notes that marginalized ethnic groups in Uganda have historically experienced exclusion from decision-making, resulting in inadequate representation and limited access to resources. The study found that regions such as northern Uganda, inhabited predominantly by marginalized ethnic communities, face underfunded healthcare services and poor educational infrastructure, leading to negative health and social outcomes. Kasozi (2013) observes that exclusion from local government decision-making limits the ability of marginalized groups to influence service delivery outcomes, while Oloka-Onyango (2017) highlights that dominant ethnic groups often maintain control over resources, reinforcing inequalities. These dynamics reflect systemic discrimination and social marginalization, which exacerbate disparities in access to services and hinder equitable development (Green, 2018; Mwenda, 2018).

The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to enhance inclusion and equitable access to services. Barkan (2011) emphasizes affirmative action programs and quotas as mechanisms to increase representation and participation of marginalized groups in decision-making processes. Furthermore, Kodesh (2014) highlights the value of community-led initiatives in empowering marginalized communities and promoting their involvement in governance processes. Supporting such initiatives can address historical and structural inequalities, foster greater social cohesion, and improve service delivery outcomes. The study demonstrates that understanding the experiences of marginalized ethnic groups provides critical insights into the complex interplay of ethnic nationalism and service delivery in Uganda. These insights offer

guidance for policymakers to develop context-sensitive strategies that promote inclusivity, equity, and sustainable development across diverse communities.

Conclusion

The study provides an in-depth examination of the intricate relationships between ethnic nationalism, service delivery, and development outcomes in Uganda, revealing how deeply ethnicity shapes governance and resource allocation. Dominant ethnic groups frequently prioritize their interests over those of marginalized communities, resulting in unequal access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure, while marginalized groups face persistent barriers to participation in decision-making processes, limiting their influence over local development priorities and perpetuating social and economic inequalities. Decentralization introduces a complex dynamic, offering opportunities for improved responsiveness and inclusive governance where local politics encourage cooperation, yet also creating risks of favoritism and exclusion when ethnic affiliations dictate political behavior, leading to concentrated resources within dominant groups and underserved marginalized communities. Traditional leaders emerge as critical actors, capable of mediating conflicts, fostering reconciliation, and cultivating inter-ethnic cooperation that strengthens social cohesion and enables more effective service delivery. Community-based initiatives and peacebuilding programs further contribute to inclusive outcomes by promoting dialogue, trust, and collaboration across ethnic lines, ensuring that development interventions reach diverse populations. These findings highlight the necessity of context-sensitive approaches that acknowledge local power dynamics, leverage the influence of traditional authorities, and support initiatives fostering inter-ethnic collaboration, emphasizing that achieving sustainable and equitable development in Uganda requires deliberate measures to address ethnic inequalities, strengthen participatory governance, and

ensure service delivery systems respond fairly and effectively to the needs of all communities.

Contributions

This study significantly advances understanding of the complex dynamics between ethnic nationalism and service delivery in Uganda, emphasizing the necessity for policymakers to confront systemic inequalities and biases that compromise service delivery outcomes, particularly for marginalized ethnic groups. Promoting inclusive and equitable service delivery addresses the root causes of ethnic tensions and fosters sustainable peace and development. Ensuring the active participation of marginalized groups in decision-making processes and securing their access to essential services remains critical, which can include implementing affirmative action programs and quotas to enhance representation and participation. Initiatives that promote interethnic dialogue and reconciliation, such as community-based projects and peacebuilding programs, play a vital role in fostering trust, cooperation, and social cohesion. Additionally, careful consideration of the intersection between decentralization and ethnic nationalism is essential in designing service delivery programs, with mechanisms that ensure local-level politicians remain accountable, preventing the concentration of resources along ethnic lines and supporting more equitable and effective governance outcomes.

Recommendations

Addressing the complex challenges arising from the intersection of ethnic nationalism and service delivery in Uganda requires a paradigm shift toward inclusive and equitable governance. This transformation entails strengthening institutions, ensuring transparency, promoting accountability, and allocating public goods and services according to need rather than ethnic affiliation. Institutional strengthening is vital, as weak institutions have perpetuated ethnic patronage

and undermined service delivery. Reforms such as enhancing judicial independence, constitutional safeguards, and robust anti-corruption mechanisms can provide a framework for reducing ethnic tensions and fostering accountability. Transparency and accountability in budget allocation and public procurement processes are equally essential, preventing favoritism and promoting equitable access to services. Promoting inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation serves as a complementary strategy to mitigate tensions and foster a shared sense of citizenship. Community-based peacebuilding programs and national reconciliation commissions can facilitate constructive engagement, while decentralization offers opportunities to empower local communities to manage their affairs, though it must be implemented cautiously to avoid exacerbating divisions. Addressing the historical roots of ethnic nationalism through truth-telling and reconciliation further strengthens efforts to cultivate a cohesive national identity.

Future research should explore the lived experiences of marginalized ethnic groups, focusing on access to services and participation in decision-making processes across different local contexts, including urban and rural areas. Investigating the impact of decentralization on service delivery outcomes and assessing the effectiveness of initiatives promoting inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation can generate insights into mechanisms that foster inclusive and equitable service delivery. Such studies would provide a nuanced understanding of how governance structures, local politics, and ethnic dynamics interact to shape development outcomes, offering evidence to guide policy formulation and program design.

The findings of this study carry significant practical implications for policymakers, practitioners, and development partners. Policymakers should prioritize inclusive service delivery, ensuring all citizens access essential services irrespective of ethnic background. Practitioners should support community-led initiatives that facilitate inter-ethnic dialogue and empower marginalized groups, while donors and development partners should allocate resources to initiatives that promote equity and support systemic reforms. Promoting sustainable peace and development requires an enduring commitment to including marginalized ethnic groups and fostering inter-ethnic cooperation. These recommendations provide a critical foundation for advancing equitable development, offering guidance for future research and practical interventions aimed at addressing ethnic inequalities and enhancing service delivery outcomes in Uganda.

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