



Income Inequality and Community Cohesion: A Comprehensive Analysis of East Africa

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Abstract

This study examines the intricate relationship between income inequality and community cohesion in East Africa, focusing on its effects in countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. Through a systematic literature review approach, relevant studies from prominent databases were synthesised to reveal how income disparities adversely impact social capital, trust, and community engagement. Findings indicate that income inequality significantly affects access to education, healthcare, social mobility, crime rates, political participation, and ultimately diminishes social cohesion. Disparities in educational and healthcare access perpetuate cycles of poverty and disadvantage, limiting opportunities for upward mobility, particularly for marginalised groups. These inequalities foster feelings of resentment, mistrust, and isolation within communities, obstructing collective action and civic participation. While the study enhances understanding of these dynamics, it is limited by potential publication bias and the exclusion of non-English sources, possibly narrowing the findings' applicability. To address these issues, policymakers must prioritise strategies that improve educational access, expand healthcare coverage, and create economic opportunities for disadvantaged populations. Such interventions could mitigate the detrimental effects of income inequality, fostering greater trust, cooperation, and solidarity among community members. In conclusion, offsetting income inequality is crucial for promoting a more equitable and cohesive society in East Africa, highlighting the need for comprehensive public policies that empower marginalised groups and enhance overall community resilience. Future research should aim to explore the evolving dynamics within this context, considering the intersections of income inequality and social cohesion across diverse settings.

Introduction

Income inequality is a critical challenge in East Africa, significantly impacting social cohesion, particularly in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. This inequality undermines social capital—encompassing trust, cooperation, and community engagement—leading to fragmented communities and reduced civic participation (Mawere & Chigora, 2023; Kinyanjui & Mjomba, 2023). Urban areas like Nairobi and Dar es Salaam exemplify this situation, where the widening gap between affluent and low-income populations has decreased involvement in local governance and civic activities. Many individuals feel increasingly isolated and marginalised from decision-making processes, a perspective supported by Muriuki and Ochieng (2023), who assert that disparities in wealth obstruct effective social networking, ultimately diminishing community cohesion and collective action.



Recent research underscores the relationship between income inequality and social cohesion, revealing that elevated levels of inequality diminish trust among community members and obstruct collaborative efforts (Odugbemi & Luyet, 2022). Nations like Kenya and Tanzania experience significant income gaps linked to weakened community networks and reduced civic engagement (Odugbemi et al., 2021). Economies burdened by income inequality often struggle with fractured community relations, leading to lesser participation in local projects (Jones et al., 2023). Additionally, inconsistencies in access to quality education deepen poverty cycles and limit social mobility, presenting a dual threat to economic stability and the vital social fabric that fosters community resilience (Munyua, 2023).

Access to healthcare is similarly affected by income inequality, as those from lower-income backgrounds encounter substantial obstacles, such as inadequate insurance coverage and insufficient local healthcare facilities. These challenges exacerbate health disparities and threaten community welfare (Olayanju et al., 2020). Research indicates a link between rising income inequality and deteriorating healthcare quality for low-income groups, resulting in poor health outcomes (Raghupathi & Raghupathi, 2022). Furthermore, the mental health effects of income inequality are significant, as those from lower socioeconomic positions experience increased levels of anxiety and depression due to financial stress and limited access to mental health services (Bell & Marmot, 2023). To tackle these complex issues, it is essential to implement comprehensive public health policies that improve healthcare access for marginalised populations and address the underlying factors contributing to income inequality (Zschau et al., 2023).

This paper aims to comprehensively analyse the intricate relationship between income inequality and community cohesion in East Africa. By synthesising existing research, the study seeks to elucidate how income disparities affect social capital, trust, and community engagement, ultimately proposing effective interventions and policies to mitigate these adverse effects. Through this exploration, the research contributes meaningfully to the discourse on fostering unity and collaboration among diverse income groups in the region, thereby promoting a more equitable and inclusive society.

Methodology

This research employed a systematic literature review approach to explore the complex connections among income inequality, social capital, and community cohesion in East Africa. The aim was to consolidate existing research to enhance comprehension of how income disparities shape social dynamics and influence varying levels of community cohesion across the region. By conducting a strategic search through prominent databases such as JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar, the researchers incorporated a combination of targeted keywords, including "income inequality," "community cohesion," and "social networks," to compile a thorough collection of relevant studies and reports from the past decade (2013-2022). Rigorous inclusion criteria were established, focusing solely on peer-reviewed articles and credible reports that offered empirical data and theoretical frameworks related to income inequality and community dynamics.

After collecting relevant literature, the study utilised systematic coding and thematic analysis to pinpoint key themes concerning the link between income inequality and community cohesion. This stage involved categorising sources by research methodology and main arguments, which allowed for the triangulation of findings from different expert analyses. The review also considered the broader socio-political context of income inequality, delving into regional dynamics and the impact of external factors, such as international organisations and local governance. Although the structured nature of this systematic review enhances the reliability of the findings, potential limitations, including publication bias and the exclusion of non-English sources, may affect the overall comprehensiveness of the insights obtained. Ultimately, the study



sought to inform the understanding of the intricate relationship between income inequality and social cohesion, providing guidance for future research and policy development in East Africa.

Findings and Discussion

Relationship between Income Inequality and Community Cohesion

Income inequality significantly impacts various aspects of community life in East Africa, including access to education, healthcare, social mobility, crime rates, gender equality, political participation, food security, and social cohesion (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2020). By examining these interconnected challenges, we gain a deeper understanding of the difficulties individuals and communities face, which can inform strategies for promoting greater equality and unity (Boarini et al., 2018). An essential area influenced by income inequality is the availability of equal opportunities, where unequal access to education and employment opportunities fosters resentment and division among community members (Krause & Naim, 2020). For instance, individuals in rural regions with lower educational levels in Kenya are frequently relegated to informal, low-paying jobs (World Bank, 2016). Addressing these disparities by ensuring equitable access to resources can create stronger, more united communities that enable all members to succeed (Mastrorillo et al., 2016).

In Uganda, there is a notable disparity in educational attainment between urban and rural children; urban students often attend better-funded schools, while those in rural areas face overcrowded classrooms and under-resourced facilities (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2020). Improving educational access can help level the playing field and foster social cohesion (Garcia & Weiss 2019). Additionally, income inequality limits access to healthcare, as low-income individuals struggle to obtain essential medical services (Olayanju et al., 2020). In Tanzania, many people in lower-income brackets resort to traditional medicine or forgo treatment entirely due to high costs and insufficient facilities (WHO 2021). This situation heightens health risks and undermines community trust and cohesion. To achieve better health outcomes, promoting universal access to healthcare is vital (González et al., 2021). Furthermore, income inequality constrains social mobility; in Ethiopia, for instance, social mobility is hindered as access to higher education and job opportunities remains closely linked to family wealth (Hannum & Bloom, 2019). Policymakers can enhance social mobility through initiatives focused on skills training, vocational education, and economic support for low-income families, contributing to a more equitable society (Chigunta, 2017).

The effects of income inequality on community cohesion in East Africa

A significant aspect of income inequality is its effect on educational outcomes in East Africa. Studies indicate that children from low-income families are less likely to obtain a quality education than those from wealthier backgrounds (Mogari et al., 2020). This disparity in educational access continues the cycle of poverty and restricts social mobility within communities (Oketch & Somerset, 2017). Tackling income inequality ensures every child has the same chance to succeed academically and in their future endeavours (González et al., 2021).

In addition, income inequality greatly affects access to healthcare services in East Africa. Those living in poverty frequently encounter obstacles that prevent them from receiving quality healthcare, which results in poorer health outcomes and elevated mortality rates (Olayanju et al., 2020). It is imperative to address income inequality to enhance health outcomes and mitigate disparities in healthcare access across communities (González et al., 2021). Policymakers should prioritise equitable healthcare strategies to tackle the underlying causes of income inequality and strengthen community cohesion (Chetty et al., 2016). Another critical aspect is how income inequality influences social mobility in East Africa. Limited economic advancement opportunities restrict individuals' ability to ascend the social hierarchy and realise their full potential (Chigunta, 2017). This restriction can foster resentment and dissatisfaction within communities, weakening



social cohesion (Mastrorillo et al., 2016). Effectively addressing income inequality is essential for enhancing social mobility and promoting a more equitable society where all individuals can thrive.

Impact of income inequality on social cohesion

Income inequality markedly disrupts social cohesion in communities across East Africa by inciting resentment, envy, and mistrust among individuals, ultimately weakening the unity and solidarity vital for harmonious societies (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). The imbalances in income distribution lead to a significant segment of the population being excluded from economic opportunities, which fosters feelings of alienation and disconnection (Krause & Naim 2020). This lack of access—especially to quality education and healthcare—perpetuates cycles of poverty, disadvantage, and frustration, which can potentially trigger social unrest (Chowa et al., 2020; Mastrorillo et al., 2016). For instance, children from low-income households frequently do not have the same educational resources available to them as their wealthier counterparts, creating disparities in academic performance and prospects that perpetuate intergenerational poverty (Oketch & Somerset, 2017; González et al., 2021). Likewise, challenges in obtaining quality healthcare worsen health outcomes and life expectancy inequalities, leading to a pervasive sense of injustice in communities and undermining trust and cooperation among individuals (Olayanju et al., 2020; Baker et al., 2021).

Effects of Income Inequality on Educational and Healthcare Outcomes in East Africa

Disparities in access to education

Income inequality plays a crucial role in creating disparities in educational access throughout East Africa, directly affecting individual educational outcomes and, in turn, the cohesion of communities (Chowa et al., 2020). A clear example can be observed in Ethiopia, where a marked rural-urban divide exists, and urban areas enjoy well-funded schools staffed with qualified educators. At the same time, rural regions suffer from under-resourced institutions and elevated dropout rates (Mekonen & Berhanu, 2018). This uneven distribution of educational resources perpetuates cycles of disadvantage among marginalised populations, impeding overall social advancement and unity (Osei-Akoto, 2020).

The challenge is further exacerbated in Kenya, where students from the lowest income brackets experience notably lower enrollment rates and higher dropout rates than their wealthier peers, reinforcing educational disparities and restricting chances for social mobility (UNICEF, 2019). The implications of income inequality on educational outcomes extend beyond access to schooling; they also affect health and social mobility in East Africa (Mastrorillo et al., 2016). Limited access to quality education can hinder individuals' ability to make informed health decisions and obtain necessary healthcare. For instance, individuals with lower educational levels in Uganda tend to experience poorer health outcomes (Baker et al., 2021). Moreover, educational inequities further constrain social mobility. In Rwanda, even though the government has tried to broaden educational access, disparities persist for low-income families who face financial obstacles in pursuing secondary or higher education (UNESCO, 2021). This lack of access to educational opportunities fosters feelings of hopelessness and disempowerment among marginalised groups, which can further weaken community cohesion (Krause & Naim, 2020). Addressing income inequality is critical to dismantling these barriers and promoting greater regional social mobility.

Healthcare disparities among different income groups

People from lower income brackets often face challenges such as limited financial resources, lack of health insurance, and insufficient healthcare facilities within their communities (Kawano & Ye, 2021). For instance, in Uganda, approximately 37% of the population has health insurance, leaving many individuals dependent on out-of-pocket payments, which can burden them with high healthcare costs and negatively impact their health outcomes (Kawonga et al., 2020). This inequity harms individual health and extends to broader social issues, including decreased productivity and soaring healthcare expenses (World Health Organization, 2020). In Kenya, studies show that children from low-income households are 50% more likely to experience stunted growth due to



factors such as limited access to preventive care and higher rates of chronic diseases (Mastrorillo et al., 2016; Sharan & Reddy, 2019). Likewise, a survey in Tanzania revealed that financial limitations often led individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to postpone treatment for chronic diseases, which worsened health issues and increased healthcare costs (Hounton et al., 2020). These trends perpetuate a vicious cycle of poverty and poor health, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive measures to improve healthcare access and equity.

Influence of Income Inequality on Social Mobility in East Africa

Education and healthcare are essential for fostering social mobility in East African societies and are crucial to human capital development. Investments in these areas can create more equitable conditions for individuals, equipping them with the necessary skills and services to elevate their socio-economic standing (Kozlowski & Shimeles, 2020). Policymakers must address the underlying causes of income inequality through strategic investments to strengthen community cohesion (World Bank, 2019). However, disparities in educational access significantly impede progress throughout the region, particularly in Tanzania, where children from low-income households encounter obstacles to quality education and lower rates of enrollment in higher education, thereby perpetuating social hierarchies and limiting social mobility (Maro et al., 2020).

Effective interventions such as scholarships and mentorship programs have been implemented to address these disparities. For example, Kenya's "Elimu Scholarship Program" focuses on talented but underprivileged students from marginalised backgrounds, covering tuition fees and providing mentorship, which has led to improved retention and graduation rates (Oketch & Ngware, 2019). Furthermore, access to healthcare is vital for promoting social mobility, as inadequate healthcare systems—like those seen in Uganda—limit individual's ability to afford necessary medical care, ultimately impacting their productivity and economic opportunities (Mastrorillo et al., 2016). Rwanda's National Health Insurance Scheme is a successful model for improving healthcare access, achieving nearly universal coverage while emphasising preventive care, enabling individuals to participate more actively in education and economic activities (Agyepong et al., 2021). Additionally, policies such as progressive taxation and social welfare initiatives in Ethiopia aid upward mobility by providing essential financial support to low-income families, allowing them to invest in their education and healthcare (Chou et al., 2017). These comprehensive strategies reduce financial strain and empower individuals, creating pathways for economic enhancement.

Relationship between Income Inequality and Crime Rates in East Africa

Studies show that higher income inequality is linked to a rise in criminal behaviour, primarily due to a lack of economic opportunities for marginalised groups, uneven access to resources, and feelings of frustration and alienation among those living in poverty (Bourguignon, 2001; Kelly, 2000; Semenova, 2019). In Kenya, a 2020 report from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics highlighted a significant uptick in property crimes, especially theft and burglary, in urban centres like Nairobi, where economic disparities are stark. This trend indicates that individuals from lower-income areas might turn to crime out of financial necessity, underscoring the adverse effects of widening wealth disparities (KNBS, 2020). Similarly, research in Tanzania has evidenced that the expanding gap between the wealthy and the impoverished has contributed to an increase in crimes driven by poverty, along with a rise in gang-related activities in economically marginalised regions (Chirebvu, 2020; Haller et al., 2021).

The connection between income inequality and crime is two-way; crime also exacerbates income inequality. For instance, the Ugandan Bureau of Statistics reported that crime victims, primarily from low-income households, often incur financial losses that deepen their poverty and hinder their economic advancement (UBOS, 2018). Furthermore, marginalised individuals involved in the criminal justice system frequently encounter legal repercussions that restrict future opportunities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and criminal activity (Fajnzylber et al., 2002). To address these challenges, initiatives such as Uganda's Youth Livelihood Program aim to provide economic opportunities for marginalised youth, thus reducing their susceptibility to criminal behaviour



(World Bank, 2018). Additionally, community policing initiatives in Kenya focus on strengthening the relationship between law enforcement and local communities, promoting a collaborative approach to crime reduction through enhanced engagement and financial investment (Klien et al., 2020). A holistic strategy that involves policymakers, researchers, and community activists is crucial to effectively address the interconnected challenges of income inequality and crime, fostering more cohesive and resilient communities throughout East Africa.

Impact of crime on community cohesion

Crime poses a significant threat to community cohesion in East Africa, eroding trust and social ties while creating instability in neighbourhoods (Ndegwa, 2019). Crime instils fear among residents, fostering distrust, weakening social connections and diminishing collaboration (Baud et al., 2020). This disintegration is evident in reduced social interactions, increased feelings of isolation, and a diminished sense of belonging, impacting communities' overall well-being (Mugisha et al., 2021). In cities like Nairobi and Kisumu, pervasive insecurity coupled with high rates of violent crime drives residents to withdraw into isolation rather than engage with one another, which undermines collective crime prevention initiatives such as community policing (Ndegwa, 2019).

The economic ramifications of crime exacerbate these challenges, dissuading investment and lowering property values in areas plagued by high crime rates. According to Okeyo (2019), many potential investors in some areas of Nairobi opt for more secure locations, hindering economic growth and perpetuating poverty. Furthermore, crime disproportionately impacts marginalised communities, worsening existing disparities and heightening feelings of injustice (Khalid, 2022; Petersen, 2018). In Uganda, increased concerns about crime have weakened community bonds and fewer social gatherings, while in Ethiopia, civil unrest and criminal activities have intensified ethnic divisions rather than promoting unity (Henze, 2020; Mugisha et al., 2021). To strengthen community cohesion in East Africa, it is vital to implement initiatives that tackle the underlying causes of crime and enhance community involvement. Programmes focused on improving education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, alongside initiatives fostering collaboration between law enforcement and residents, can help create safer neighbourhoods and restore trust (Murray, 2020; Sithole, 2019).

Approaches to addressing crime in unequal societies

Policymakers should emphasise initiatives that enhance access to education, job training, and economic opportunities to decrease the drivers of criminal activity. For instance, Kenya's "Youth Empowerment Program," established by the Nairobi City County Government, seeks to provide vocational training and entrepreneurship resources to marginalised youth in low-income areas, empowering them and reducing their potential engagement in crime (Atuahene, 2018). Evaluations have shown that such programmes can yield positive outcomes, including a decrease in gang involvement, by offering youths constructive avenues to utilise their skills.

Addressing income inequality also encompasses improving access to healthcare, which is crucial in influencing crime rates. Individuals unable to afford medical care may turn to illegal means to secure healthcare, thus contributing to ongoing criminal activities (Mugisha et al., 2021). For example, Kenya's National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF) provides subsidised healthcare to low-income individuals, easing the economic burdens that might push them toward crime (Okeyo, 2019). Likewise, the Ugandan government's provision of free HIV/AIDS treatment has expanded healthcare access for at-risk populations, resulting in better health outcomes and enhanced productivity, which may, in turn, lower crime driven by desperation (Mugisha et al., 2021).

Additionally, advancing social mobility through equitable resource access is vital for breaking the cycle of poverty and crime. Initiatives such as Tanzania's "Big Results Now initiative" focus on eliminating barriers to education and employment, empowering marginalised communities and tackling socioeconomic inequalities that can lead to criminal behaviour (Tanzania Commission for AIDS, 2020). In Rwanda, the government promotes entrepreneurship among disadvantaged youth



through microloans and business training, which helps alleviate poverty and encourages stability, further reducing the likelihood of crime (Ndegwa, 2019). Together, these diverse strategies support marginalised populations and address the systemic issues tied to income inequality, ultimately fostering more substantial, more cohesive communities that are better equipped to face the challenges of crime and violence in East Africa.

Impact of Income Inequality on Political Participation in East Africa

Political exclusion of marginalised groups

Groups such as women, ethnic minorities, and individuals with disabilities encounter various obstacles that hinder their participation in political affairs, which has critical repercussions for societal stability and development (Acharya & Dutta, 2020). Although progress has been made toward improved representation, considerable gaps still exist. For instance, in Tanzania, a constitutional quota requires a minimum of 30% representation for women in the National Assembly, yet cultural and structural barriers often restrict their political involvement. Traditional norms and political patronage further limit women's ability to effectively advocate for the needs of their communities (Musa & Agu, 2021; Mkombe & Kihore, 2020). In Kenya, ethnic minorities such as the Maasai experience political marginalisation, which results in social unrest and ongoing disputes over land and resources, as their specific interests are rarely reflected in legislative decisions (Okello & Juma, 2022; Bogaards, 2021).

The relationship between political exclusion and access to healthcare is particularly concerning. In Uganda, marginalised populations, especially individuals with disabilities, encounter challenges accessing healthcare due to their limited representation in decision-making roles (Namasasu & Muhammed, 2022). Healthcare policies often ignore these groups' distinct difficulties, leading to insufficient services and widening health disparities that contribute to broader economic inequalities. Similarly, in Ethiopia, the Multinational Federalism framework, intended to empower ethnic groups, frequently marginalises smaller communities in healthcare policy discussions, neglecting their needs (Mwaniki & Mohammed, 2021). The focus on dominant ethnic narratives exacerbates the marginalisation of these communities, leaving many without essential health services and perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion.

A collaborative effort among all stakeholders is required to address political exclusion and establish an inclusive governance framework. Implementing affirmative action policies for underrepresented groups has proven an effective strategy in several East African nations (Aka, 2021). For example, Kenya's Constitution advocates for equal representation, although enforcement challenges persist. Furthermore, offering leadership training and capacity-building initiatives for marginalised groups can empower them to engage effectively in political activities. Grassroots movements that promote awareness of the significance of inclusive governance are also crucial for driving change. Involving civil society organisations in advocacy efforts can amplify the voices of marginalised individuals, shaping policies that encourage community cohesion and equitable development, thus addressing the underlying causes of exclusion (Gomez & Rojas, 2021; Friedman, 2019).

Impact of Income Inequality on Social Cohesion and Trust in East Africa

Income inequality in East Africa has led to considerable social divisions within communities, negatively impacting education, healthcare, social mobility, and political participation. This disparity disproportionately marginalises certain groups, restricting their access to the benefits of economic growth and contributing to social unrest. For example, in Kenya, stark urban-rural differences in educational access exist, with the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) reporting that only about 60% of children from low-income rural households complete primary education, in contrast to nearly 90% of their higher-income counterparts (KNBS, 2020). In Tanzania, research by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) revealed that children in poorer areas are significantly less likely to achieve critical literacy skills by age 15, with only 30%



reaching this milestone, compared to wealthier regions such as Dar es Salaam (UNICEF, 2021). These educational disparities reinforce poverty cycles and hinder personal progress and national growth.

Income disparities across East Africa similarly influence healthcare access. In Uganda, the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) reported that affluent households are over three times more likely to access quality health services than poorer families (UBOS, 2021). This gap was particularly highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, when wealthier communities had more accessible vaccinations and health care than marginalised populations, worsening health outcome inequalities (The Lancet, 2021). In Ethiopia, isolated rural communities face significant challenges, including high costs and insufficient healthcare facilities, which limit their ability to obtain essential health services (Banteyerga et al., 2020). Furthermore, social mobility is significantly restricted in South Sudan, where only 14% of young people from low-income families can access higher education, compared to 53% from wealthier backgrounds (World Bank, 2022). This lack of opportunities sustains poverty and damages community trust and cohesion. Additionally, political engagement is skewed, with individuals from low-income backgrounds being less likely to participate in voting or political processes (Tanzania National Electoral Commission, 2020), resulting in policies that further entrench social disparities. To foster a more equitable society, it is essential to implement targeted interventions and inclusive growth strategies to address these deep-rooted inequalities.

Conclusion

This study highlights the complex relationship between income inequality and community cohesion in East Africa. The findings indicate that significant income disparities adversely affect access to essential services such as education and healthcare, limit social mobility, and breed distrust among community members. Such conditions foster feelings of isolation, resentment, and disengagement from civic activities, ultimately undermining social cohesion. Addressing these issues is crucial for promoting a more equitable and cohesive society in the region.

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