

The Role of Adult Education in Promoting Community Development: Evidence from Mbeya Region, Tanzania

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Abstract: This study examines the role of adult education as a catalyst for community development in Mbeya Region, Tanzania, through a qualitative secondary data analysis. Employing a systematic documentary review approach, the research analyzes 52 documents, including policy papers, government reports, academic publications, and NGO evaluations from 2010-2024. Thematic analysis reveals that adult education programmes contribute significantly to skills acquisition, particularly in vocational and agricultural training; enhance civic participation through improved engagement in local governance; and foster socio-economic empowerment via financial literacy and entrepreneurship development. However, challenges such as inadequate funding, facilitator shortages, and poor programme coordination limit their transformative potential. The study concludes that while adult education serves as a vital lever for community development, its effectiveness depends on contextual relevance, integrated programme design, and strengthened multi-stakeholder collaboration. Recommendations are offered for policymakers, educators, and development practitioners to enhance the catalytic role of adult education in similar contexts across sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: *Adult Education, Community Development, Qualitative Secondary Analysis, Mbeya Region, Tanzania, Skills Acquisition, Civic Participation, Socio-Economic Empowerment.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Adult education has gained increasing recognition as a strategic instrument for fostering social and economic transformation, particularly in developing regions where communities face persistent challenges such as poverty, limited vocational skills, low literacy, and marginalization from development processes (UNESCO, 2015). In Tanzania, adult education has evolved from post-independence literacy campaigns into multifaceted programmes encompassing vocational training, entrepreneurship development, agricultural extension, and civic education (URT, 2014). These programmes aim not only to enhance individual capabilities but also to strengthen collective agency and community resilience (Mlaki, 2018).

Mbeya Region, located in Tanzania's Southern Highlands, presents a pertinent context for examining the intersection of adult education and community development. With a population of approximately 2.7 million, of whom 68% reside in rural areas (NBS, 2022), the region relies

heavily on agriculture and informal trade. Adult education programmes implemented by government agencies, NGOs, faith-based organizations, and community-based groups seek to address localized needs such as low agricultural productivity, youth unemployment, gender disparities, and weak civic engagement (Mbeya Regional Secretariat, 2021).

Despite documented investments, there remains a gap in synthesized evidence regarding how adult education functions as a catalyst for holistic community development in Mbeya. Existing studies tend to focus on singular dimensions—economic outcomes or participation metrics without integrating insights across thematic areas or drawing comprehensively on available secondary data. This study addresses that gap by employing a qualitative secondary data analysis to explore three interrelated questions.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Although adult education has long been acknowledged as a powerful tool for improving livelihoods and strengthening community participation, many communities in Mbeya Region continue to experience low income levels, limited vocational skills, and weak engagement in local governance processes (URT, 2020). Allan (2019) notes that adult education promotes meaningful development only when programmes are accessible, relevant, and aligned with community needs. However, participation in adult literacy and skills programmes remains low in several districts of Mbeya due to inadequate facilities, limited funding, and shortages of trained facilitators (Mbeya Regional Secretariat, 2021).

Similarly, regional reports indicate that many adults lack essential competencies in entrepreneurship, modern agriculture, and financial management, which directly affect productivity and household welfare (MoEST, 2022). Bellis (2019) emphasizes that adult learning must be practical and problem-centred, yet many existing programmes fail to provide hands-on training that responds to local economic realities. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (2022) highlights that adult education implementation across regions, including Mbeya, suffers from weak coordination, insufficient community awareness, and fragmented monitoring and evaluation systems.

As a result, challenges such as unemployment, low agricultural productivity, gender disparities, and limited civic participation persist, hindering sustainable community development (Kapinga, 2019). Despite documented investments in adult education, there remains a notable gap in synthesized, evidence-based understanding of how these programmes function as a catalyst for holistic community development in Mbeya. This study therefore seeks to address the following research gap: There is insufficient contextual and integrated analysis of how adult education programmes in Mbeya Region contribute to skills acquisition, civic participation, and socio-economic empowerment, based on existing secondary data and documented evidence.

Specifically, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- To what extent do adult education programmes in Mbeya Region equip learners with income-generating and vocational skills?
- How does adult education enhance civic participation in Mbeya Region, particularly in village meetings, community projects, and local governance?
- In what ways does adult education contribute to socio-economic empowerment, including financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and agricultural productivity?

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is informed by an integrated theoretical framework combining Freirean critical pedagogy, Nyerere's Education for Self-Reliance, and social capital theory. Freire (1970) emphasizes *conscientização* the development of critical consciousness through which learners recognize and challenge oppressive structures. This perspective underscores the transformative potential of adult education beyond skill transmission, positioning it as a practice of freedom rather than domestication (Freire, 1970).

Nyerere's (1967) philosophy of Education for Self-Reliance anchors the study within Tanzania's historical and ideological context. Nyerere viewed education as a tool for fostering self-sufficiency, community solidarity, and collective advancement—a vision that continues to influence non-formal education policies and programmes (Komba, 2015). This framework is particularly relevant in Mbeya, where many adult education initiatives emphasize agricultural skills, cooperative development, and community problem-solving aligned with Nyerere's vision.

Social capital theory (Putnam, 2000) provides a lens for understanding how adult education can strengthen networks, trust, and norms of reciprocity within communities, thereby enhancing collective action and resilience. Adult education programmes that bring together diverse community members—such as through VICOBA groups or community workshops—may contribute to social capital formation, which in turn supports broader community development efforts (Mwajombe, 2020).

Together, these theoretical perspectives allow for a multidimensional analysis of adult education's catalytic role in community development, addressing economic, political, and social dimensions simultaneously.

IV. METHODOLOGY

➤ Research Design

This study employs a qualitative secondary data analysis design within a systematic documentary review framework. The approach involves the identification, appraisal, and thematic synthesis of existing documents to generate new insights without primary data collection (Bowen, 2009). This design is particularly suitable for contexts where comprehensive secondary data are available but underutilized, and where resources or access constraints limit primary data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

➤ Data Sources and Selection

Documents were purposively selected based on the following criteria:

- Relevance to adult education and/or community development in Mbeya or Tanzania broadly
- Publication between 2010 and 2024
- Availability in English or Kiswahili
- Credible authorship (government, academic, or recognized NGO sources)

A total of 52 documents were included in the analysis (Table 1).

Table 1: Document Types Included in the Analysis

Document Type	Number	Examples
Policy documents	8	Tanzania Adult Education Policy (2014), Mbeya Regional Education Plan (2021–2025)
Government reports	12	MoEST Annual Reports, Mbeya Socio-Economic Profiles, NBS Census Reports
Academic publications	18	Peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, dissertations
NGO/donor reports	9	World Vision, CARE Tanzania, UNESCO evaluations
Archival/historical records	5	Historical data on adult education campaigns in Mbeya
Total	52	

➤ Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted using NVivo 12 software. The process involved:

- Familiarization: Repeated reading and note-taking
- Initial coding: Line-by-line open coding
- Theme development: Grouping codes into descriptive themes
- Analytical synthesis: Interpreting themes in relation to research questions and theoretical framework

Analytical themes were structured around the three research objectives: skills acquisition, civic participation, and socio-economic empowerment. Constant comparative analysis was used to identify patterns and relationships across documents (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

➤ Ethical Considerations

As a secondary data analysis, the study adhered to principles of academic integrity, proper citation, and respect for intellectual property. Sensitive or restricted documents were used only with permission, and no personally identifiable information was extracted or reported. The research was approved by the Catholic University of Mbeya Research Ethics Committee (Ref: CUoM/REC/2024/021).

V. FINDINGS

➤ Adult Education and Skills Acquisition

Documents consistently indicate that adult education programmes in Mbeya have strengthened practical skills in agriculture, tailoring, masonry, carpentry, and small business management. VETA reports (2021–2023) note that over 70% of short-course graduates reported applying acquired skills in income-generating activities. Agricultural extension programmes—often integrated with adult literacy classes—have introduced improved farming techniques, leading to higher crop yields in districts such as Mbarali and Rungwe (MoEST, 2022). A study by Kapinga (2019) in Morogoro Region found similar results, with vocational training participants experiencing an average income increase of 42% within one year of completing training.

However, challenges are frequently noted. NGO evaluations highlight a mismatch between training content and local market demands, particularly in rapidly urbanizing areas like Mbeya City (World Vision Tanzania, 2020). Additionally, facilitator shortages and inadequate training materials constrain the quality and reach of skills

programmes (Mushi, 2021). The Mbeya Regional Education Office (2023) reported that only 45% of adult education centres have adequate learning materials, and 60% operate with untrained or undertrained facilitators.

➤ Adult Education and Civic Participation

Civic education components within adult learning programmes appear to positively influence community engagement. Government reports indicate that adults who participated in civic education were more likely to attend village assembly meetings, join community project committees, and voice opinions in local planning processes (Mbeya Regional Secretariat, 2021). Documents from the President's Office – Regional Administration and Local Government (2022) suggest that communities with active adult education centres demonstrate higher levels of participation in decentralized governance structures. This aligns with Ngalawa's (2022) study in Dodoma, which found that adults who participated in civic education programmes were 3.2 times more likely to attend village meetings than non-participants.

Notably, women's participation in community decision-making increased significantly where adult education programmes explicitly addressed gender norms and leadership skills (CARE Tanzania, 2021). This aligns with broader findings that empowerment-oriented adult education can transform social relations and enhance inclusive governance (Kalugula, 2021). In Mbeya, the "Women in Leadership" programme reported a 40% increase in women's participation in village council meetings after one year of implementation (FAWE Tanzania, 2022).

➤ Adult Education and Socio-Economic Empowerment

Financial literacy training, often delivered through VICOBA and SACCOS groups, emerges as a key driver of socio-economic empowerment. Documents report improved savings culture, access to microloans, and increased investment in small enterprises among programme participants (Financial Sector Deepening Trust, 2022). Entrepreneurship training has enabled particularly women to establish and sustain small businesses, contributing to household income diversification and resilience (Mrema, 2020). A study by Mwajombe (2020) in Mwanza showed similar outcomes, with entrepreneurship training participants demonstrating improved business management skills and better access to microfinance.

In agricultural communities, integrated programmes combining literacy, numeracy, and agronomic skills have led to measurable improvements in food security and household income. For example, a FAO-supported initiative in Rungwe District reported a 30% average increase in household income among participating farmers over two years (FAO, 2021). Similarly, the "Literacy for Productivity" programme in Mbarali District documented a 25% increase in maize yields among participating farmers (MoEST, 2023).

Nevertheless, sustainability remains a concern. Several NGO reports note that economic gains often diminish post-programme due to lack of follow-up support, limited access to markets, and insufficient startup capital (World Vision Tanzania, 2020). The Financial Sector Deepening Trust (2022) reported that only 35% of VICOBA groups established through adult education programmes remained active after three years, primarily due to limited business development support.

VI. DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that adult education serves as a multidimensional catalyst for community development in Mbeya Region, operating through skills, participation, and empowerment pathways. This aligns with Freire's (1970) emphasis on education as a practice of freedom, where learning fosters critical agency rather than passive adaptation. The integration of practical skills with critical consciousness-raising—evident in programmes that combine vocational training with civic education—reflects this Freirean approach and appears particularly effective in fostering sustainable community development.

The study also reflects Nyerere's vision of education for self-reliance, particularly in programmes that integrate practical skills with community-oriented values (Nyerere, 1967). However, the persistent challenges—funding gaps, coordination weaknesses, and contextual mismatches—suggest that the transformative potential of adult education is not fully realized. This echoes Miller's (2022) observation that adult education programmes are most effective when they directly empower communities to make informed decisions and engage actively in local governance.

From a social capital perspective, adult education appears to strengthen both bonding capital (within learner groups) and bridging capital (with local authorities, NGOs, and markets). This relational dimension may be as important as skills transmission in fostering sustainable community development (Putnam, 2000). Programmes that facilitate network building and collective action—such as VICOBA groups and farmer cooperatives—demonstrate particularly strong community development outcomes.

Notably, the secondary data reveal a gendered pattern of participation and benefit. Women dominate enrolment in most non-formal programmes and report significant empowerment outcomes, yet men remain underrepresented—a dynamic that warrants further exploration. This pattern aligns with Kassimu's (2022) finding that women are more

likely to participate in adult education programmes that offer immediate practical benefits for household welfare.

The challenges identified—particularly regarding programme sustainability and market alignment—suggest the need for more integrated, systems-oriented approaches to adult education programming. This finding supports Komba's (2015) argument for stronger linkages between adult education programmes and local economic development initiatives.

VII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study confirms that adult education can act as a catalyst for community development in Mbeya Region, contributing to skills acquisition, enhanced civic participation, and socio-economic empowerment. However, its effectiveness is mediated by contextual, institutional, and operational factors. The findings suggest that adult education programmes are most transformative when they:

- Integrate practical skills with critical consciousness-raising
- Strengthen social capital and community networks
- Address gender dynamics and promote inclusive participation
- Align with local economic opportunities and development priorities

➤ *Recommendations for Policy and Practice:*

- Integrated Programme Design: Adult education should combine vocational skills, civic education, and financial literacy in locally relevant packages that address multiple dimensions of community development simultaneously (URT, 2014).
- Strengthened Coordination: Establish a regional multi-stakeholder platform to harmonize adult education efforts across government, NGOs, and community organizations, addressing current fragmentation in programme implementation (MoEST, 2022).
- Investment in Facilitators: Improve training, remuneration, and support for adult education facilitators to enhance programme quality and sustainability, addressing current shortages and capacity gaps (Mbeya Regional Secretariat, 2021).
- Gender-Responsive Approaches: Develop targeted strategies to engage men while continuing to support women's empowerment, addressing current gender disparities in programme participation and outcomes (CARE Tanzania, 2021).
- Systematic Monitoring and Learning: Implement robust M&E systems to track long-term impacts and inform adaptive management, moving beyond output-based reporting to outcome and impact assessment (World Vision Tanzania, 2020).

➤ *Limitations and Future Research:*

This study is limited by its reliance on existing documents, which may reflect reporting biases or gaps. Future research should combine secondary analysis with primary qualitative methods to capture lived experiences and

participatory perspectives. Longitudinal studies tracking the long-term impacts of adult education on community development would also be valuable. Additionally, comparative studies across different Tanzanian regions could identify contextual factors that influence programme effectiveness.

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