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"You get the money after waiting for long and you get less than you anticipated": Experiences of persons with disabilities in accessing the district special grant in Uganda

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Abstract

In 2010, Uganda scrapped an ambitious tax incentive provision in the Persons with Disabilities Act, 2006 that had allowed employers to claim up to 15% reduction in annual income tax if they hired at least 10 persons with disabilities at any job level. As though it were a trade-off, the 15% tax incentive was replaced with the special grant, a grant intended for persons with disabilities organized in small groups to generate income. The special grant started off as a pilot in 48 districts before it was rolled out nationally. Since 2019, the responsible ministry has been implementing two competing models of the same grant: the district special grant, and the national special grant. This study focused on the district special grant, and primarily explored the experiences of persons with disabilities in accessing and utilizing the grant, and the difference the grant is making. The study adopted a qualitative research approach using interviews and focus group discussions to collect data from 10 beneficiary groups drawn from 6 districts. Focus group discussions were conducted with special grant beneficiary groups while district officials responsible for the special grant and disability union representatives were individually interviewed. Data were analyzed using template coding and thematic analysis. Study findings revealed limited access to the district special grant, dismal grant amounts, significant deviations from implementation guidelines, operational dilemmas and overlooking disability related expenses in grant awards. Nonetheless, participants commended the special grant for enabling them to build social networks, gain self-confidence and starting small income generating activities. The small grant amounts disbursed to large groups that lacked business start-up skills did not support impactful business initiatives. The study revealed strong evidence for individual grants as opposed to group grants. In light of the findings, the Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development should consider remodeling the special grant into a social protection scheme awarded to individuals with disabilities for income generating activities. Importantly, disability related expenses incurred by grant beneficiaries such as the cost for personal assistant services and/or assistive devices should be factored into grant awards.

Keywords: Disability, Uganda, Self-Employment, Special Grant

1. Introduction

Over the last three decades, Uganda demonstrated commendable commitment towards promoting the employment of persons with disabilities in the formal and informal employment arenas. This is reflected in its ratification and domestication of international instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), 2006, and the International Labour Organization Convention on Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment of Disabled Persons, 1983. At domestic level, the right to work for all Ugandans is entrenched in the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995 as amended (Article 40), the Employment Act, 2006, and the Persons with Disabilities Act, 2020, which prohibits discrimination from employment on the basis of disability and makes the provision of reasonable accommodation to employees with disabilities a legal requirement (Section 9).

The UNCRPD (article 27) underscores the important role that economic empowerment plays in integrating persons with disabilities into society. Further, article 28 of the UNCRPD guarantees persons with disabilities the right to social protection without discrimination based on disability. As a State party, Uganda is required to promote opportunities for formal employment, self-employment, entrepreneurship, the development of cooperatives, and starting one's own business, as well as inclusive social protection (Article 27, 1(f)).

Despite the promising legislative and programmatic initiatives, persons with disabilities in Uganda are underrepresented in formal employment as they constitute only 1.3% of the persons in formal employment (UBOS, 2017). The under representation in formal employment of persons with disabilities is attributable to a myriad of barriers including but not limited to negative attitudes, inaccessible workplace environments and discrimination (Nyombi & Kibandama, 2014; Ojok, 2015), and denial of loans for small businesses/income generation (Labie et al., 2015; Mersland & Øystein Strøm, 2009).

Limited access to employment and economic opportunities by persons with disabilities increases their deprivation and poverty risks. This is evident in the fact that multidimensional poverty headcount ratio among Ugandans with disabilities stands at 90% compared with 57% among persons without disabilities (United Nation, 2018). Moreover, households headed by persons with disabilities are 38% more likely to live in poverty than households headed by persons without disabilities (Hoogeveen, 2005). This is despite the fact that persons with disabilities incur extra costs of living due to higher medical bills, cost of assistive devices or accessible transportation (United Nation, 2018).

Self-employment is an important livelihood option for persons with disabilities (Namatovu et al., 2012; Renko et al., 2016; Shaheen, 2016). Self-employment does not only offer persons with disabilities an opportunity to own their future, but also provides them with the flexibility to accommodate challenges related to the disability, promotes individual self-worth, accomplishment, and enhances social inclusion (Renko et al., 2016; Shaheen, 2016). Blanck, Sandier, Schmeling and Schartz (2000) suggest that self-employment should be promoted to help persons with disabilities to move from unemployment, underemployment, and welfare-based income to gainful employment.

Persons with disabilities tend to lack self-efficacy to initiate and manage business effectively (Kitching, 2014) or lack skills on how to start and run their businesses (Namatovu et al., 2012). However, with the right skills and motivation, persons with disabilities can take on entrepreneurial roles at an equal level as persons without disabilities. Customized training and business mentorship can stimulate persons with disabilities to initiate their own businesses (Tihic, 2019). Though entrepreneurs are motivated by the need for independence and not government incentives (Liu, 2012), persons with disabilities wishing to start businesses should be accorded the opportunity through offering them the required resources (Parker Harris et al., 2014; Renko et al., 2016).

While inclusion of persons with disabilities in microfinance institutions can guarantee efficient and sustainable access to funding for self-employment, the reality is that many persons with disabilities hardly access microfinance services (Klerk, 2008). Microfinance providers in Uganda perceive persons with disabilities as *risky clients* who cannot pay back loans. Consequently, credit officers discriminate against customers with disabilities by denying them equal access to credit services basing on this irrational assumption (Labie et al., 2015; Namatovu et al., 2012). A study conducted by Beisland & Mersland (2012) revealed that persons with disabilities constitute only 1% of the total customers of microfinance institutions in Uganda. Credit officers are often not able to "see past" the disability and recognize the real working ability of a person with a disability (Bwire et al., 2009). Besides the negative perceptions of microfinance providers, many persons with disabilities in Uganda lack money to deposit (Nuwagaba et al., 2012).

In Financial Year 2009/2010, Uganda repealed an ambitious tax incentive provision in the Persons with Disabilities Act, 2006 that had allowed employers to claim up to 15% tax reduction in annual income if they hired at least 10 persons with disabilities at any job level. As though it were a trade-off, the 15% tax incentive was replaced with a special grant intended to provide start-up funds for persons with disabilities who are organized in small groups (not exceeding 15 members) to start and manage income generating activities (Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development, 2023). The special grant started off as a pilot in 48 districts before it was rolled out nationally (National Council for Persons with Disabilities, 2018). Since 2019, the Ministry of Gender, Labor and ocial Development has been implementing two competing models of the special grant, i.e., the district special grant and the national special grant.

Little is known about the experiences of persons with disabilities in accessing the district special grant, whether and how they are using the grant for the intended purpose, or the difference the grant is making on the economic and social well-being of the intended beneficiaries amidst complaints of difficulty navigating the application process (Kalanzi, 2014; Ojok, 2015). The primary purpose of the present study was to explore the experiences of persons with disabilities in accessing and utilizing the special grant with a view of generating actionable strategies for reinvigorating its administration, access, monitoring and impact. Removing barriers to financial inclusion can enable many persons with disabilities to become economically self-sufficient and earn a living through work they choose on an equal basis with others and disconnect the vicious cycle of dependency and intergenerational poverty in which many of them are still trapped.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Paradigm and Approach

The study was grounded in the constructivist research paradigm. Constructivism presupposes that reality is characterized by multiple realities. Thus, to better understand reality, the focus of research should be on the individual's interpretation and experiences of that reality. Therefore, this study sought to explore the experiences of persons with disabilities in starting up income generating activities through a qualitative research approach that permits asking open-ended questions to elicit individual views about the subject of study.

2.2 Research Sites

Data for this study was collected from five regions, one district per region, The study districts included Masaka from the Central Region, Mbarara from Western Region, Soroti from Eastern Region, Gulu from Northern Region, Moroto from the Karamoja Sub-region, and Arua from West Nile sub-region. For the purpose of this study, Karamoja and West Nile sub-regions were treated as regions to ensure adequate variety in the data. From each of the districts, two focus groups were conducted with special grant beneficiaries, and individual interviews with two district officials and two disability union leaders.

2.3 Methods of Data Collection

The study employed both semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Individual semi-structured interviews were held with two district officials per district (the district focal person for the special grant and one councilor representing persons with disabilities) and representatives of the district unions of persons with disabilities. Focus groups discussions were conducted with selected beneficiary groups of persons with disabilities. Focus groups were limited to 10 members per group and all sessions lasted for not more than 60 minutes.

2.4 Sampling

Permission to collect data was obtained after presenting request letters to districts, the Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development and District Unions of persons with disabilities. District focal persons for the special grant were requested for a list of special grant beneficiaries and two groups per district were purposively selected and later contacted to participate in the study. Groups were purposively selected considering group composition, and when they received the funds. Two officials per district were also purposively selected to participate in this study. Group and individual members' willingness and informed consent were obtained before their participation in the study. Reasonable accommodation including large prints, brailed consent forms and sign language interpretation services were provided for participants who required them during the recruitment process.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the template method of coding (King, 2012) and thematic analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Data analysis primarily started with making of short field notes and later verbatim transcription of interview recordings (Mertens, 2014; Patton, 2001). All interview transcripts were read at least twice for accuracy and consistency. Coding was done using the NVIVO 12 software. Initial themes were generated from the literature and interview guides, and other codes were generated from reading through the data in the process of coding. Accordingly, the main themes were: beneficiary characteristics, group formation motives, grant utilization, navigating bureaucracies, grant remittance, supply-demand imbalance, the cost of illiteracy, disability related expenses, income empowerment, operational dilemmas, and entrepreneurial initiatives. Rigor and trustworthiness were ensured through triangulation, stakeholder audit, and member check.

2.6 Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Gulu University Research Ethics. Informed consent of participants was obtained before they participated in interviews and focus group discussions. Confidentiality of study participants was observed through using pseudo names instead of participants' names and soft copies of the data were stored in a password locked computer while hard copy files were kept under lock and key. All participants received UGX 20,000 as compensation for costs incurred in transport or feeding for the reason of this study.

3. Findings

3.1 Grant Beneficiaries Characteristics (N =139 members)

Ten special grant groups from 6 districts selected from Karamoja sub-region, western, eastern, northern, central and west nile sub-region participated in this study. Almost all the beneficiary groups except three were founded in response to the special grant program in FY 2009/10. The ten groups had a total of 139 members (male 65, female 74): group sizes ranged from 10 members with disabilities (for the smallest group) to 34 members with disabilities (for the biggest group). Generally, half of the groups comprised more than 15 members, which is in excess of the maximum group size of 15 persons per group stipulated in the implementation guidelines.

Grant amounts awarded to the ten groups ranged between UGX 450,000 (about USD120) to UGX 2,700,000 (about USD 530) for a group comprising 11 members and 20 members respectively. The study found that persons with physical disabilities (n =108) overly dominated group membership and they were remotely followed by persons with visual impairment (n =19), hearing impairment (n =07), while little persons (n =03) and persons with albinism (n =02) were the least represented respectively. Persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities were conspicuously missing in all the ten study groups that benefitted from the district special grant.

3.1.1 Group Formation Motives

By design, the special grant is not awarded to individuals but to groups of persons with disabilities (5 to max 15) to start and manage income generating activities. The reasons for forming groups ranged from a desire to save money for a living, promoting joint investments, social interactions, to the need to know and support one another. The special grant was however not necessarily the only reason behind the formation of all groups:

> *… our primary objective was not to get the special grant money. What made us to start the group was to know one another as persons with disabilities and to work together as well but the issue of applying for the special grant came later. (Group member)*
>
> *We started this group with the objective of knowing one another as persons with disabilities. Secondly, to work together and support one another in good times and in difficult moments for example you have lost a dear one or you are organizing a wedding party. (Group member)*

Some of the special grant groups (n =3) were founded before the introduction of the special grant in in 2010, with the oldest groups founded in 2000. Typically, the groups formed prior to the special grant were better structured and organized, resilient, and had clearer future compared with the groups formed in response to the special grant. Despite receiving dismal funds, such groups demonstrated resilience and enthusiasm in working together.

Group formation was also inspired by the establishment of the special grant program. The fact that groups were a pre-requisite to benefit from the special grant, some persons with disabilities were prompted to form groups to access the special grant. Generally, groups formed in response to the special grant were more likely to disintegrate before they accessed the grant or shortly after receiving or failing to receive it. Groups that disintegrated tended to be impatient in the face of delayed grant decisions or rejection of grant applications. Moreover, if they accessed the grant, they were likely to share the funds to individual members (to solve personal problems) as opposed to using it to start a group income generating activity. Some groups reportedly dissolved before/without investing the acquired grant into productive ventures.

3.1.2 Grant remittance

The district special grant is (intended to be) disbursed annually to all districts in four quarterly installments (or three monthly). The special grant amounts received by the study districts and municipalities in a financial year ranged from 8 million to 32 million Uganda shillings. However, district authorities observed that the grant amounts were not constant and kept fluctuating every subsequent financial year "*…*I think to the best of my understanding, we received 8 million shillings in the previous year and the 8 million shilling came in four quarters." (Branch representative, National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda).

It also emerged that grant remittance to groups was grossly irregular across the study districts and did not follow the set national guidelines. For example, while the districts received funds in quarterly installments, some districts disbursed the funds to groups at once instead of the required quarterly arrangement: "…what we do once they send money is that we are supposed to pay them quarterly but for us we organize those groups and we pay them at once" (Community Development Officer). A district official explained that they paid the groups at once instead of quarterly because of the meagre and fluctuating grant amounts released to districts. For example, a district official revealed that at the time of the interview, they had received only 8 million shillings for one financial year. The districts deemed that it was more cost effective to accumulate the funds and award the groups at once, because in their wisdom, a consolidated amount was easier for the groups to plan for, than small amounts disbursed in quarterly installments. While this appears to make sense in terms of saving administrative costs and bank charges, it also rendered the funds susceptible to misappropriation, as some districts diverted the funds received to other competing demands without reimbursing it. It was not clear whether this was done in consultation with the coordinating office or not or why the grant amounts sent to the districts fluctuated downward every financial year.

3.1.3 Navigating bureaucracies

Every year, districts and municipalities would publicly announce the availability of the special grant usually through a circular or internal calls for applications. Only persons with disabilities organized in and/or belonging to registered groups qualified for the grant. While district officials said that the grant application procedure was easy, groups with few or no literate members struggled with filling out the forms and completing the required paper works. Groups facing difficulties would be guided by a community development officer, but some groups sought help with their applications, usually at a cost to the group.

It was evident that persons with disabilities had high interests in the special grant suggesting a high level of awareness about the grant in the study districts. Districts received overwhelming grant applications, making the grant selection highly competitive. One of the district officials revealed that they received more than 100 group applications in a single financial year, yet the available funds were limited: "I think people are showing a lot of interest for instance in a single year, we can have up to 15 groups applying." (District Union branch representative)

The high demand for the special grant resulted in a high rejection rate and/or reducing the grant amounts awarded per group as a way of spreading the award to more groups:

> *The applicants are very many. Every financial year I receive 60 groups, 24 groups per quarter. The last quarter I got 15 groups… but when the committee sat, only 6 of the groups were approved and they shared 4.5 million shillings. (District Official)*

> *"But if you look at the number of people versus the amount given to each group, it now makes some people start doubting. Because you find that in a year maybe over 50 proposals yet we fund only 15." (District official)*

The high rejection rate and reduction of the grant amounts awarded to groups negatively impacted the morale or interest among the groups applying or reapplying for the grant. The demotivating factors varied from the dismal grant amounts awarded to groups, the hectic grant application requirements, influence peddling by lobbyists or middlemen, and multiple unsuccessful grant attempts. Several groups complained that the application process was challenging for them, while some groups experienced difficulties registering in their districts.

> *… we have a guideline that a group must first get a letter from LC I, LC II, III and recommendations from the CDOs at sub-county level. Then after that you can pay money for registration certificate at the sub-county or at the district level. Then after that you should open an account. All those processes are very expensive. (Branch representative NUDIPU)*

Some groups missed out on the grant on technical grounds such as applying for projects that they could not manage to run or had no previous experience running, while others chose projects that were under existing programs like Operation wealth Creation: "some of the groups are not yet organized. They want pigs but none of the members can manage the pig according to our assessment…we refer those ones to other government programmes like operation wealth creation." (District Official).

Technical assistance and/or lobbying for a group to get a grant implied forfeiture of some money in the form of kickbacks to whoever "lobbied" for the group to be awarded: "we first receive the fund then after receiving is when those kickbacks will come in and they don't ask for a specific amount but to decide on what to give them" (Group executive member). Ultimately, groups that did not have/use a middleman or lobbyist were less likely to succeed and probably failed multiple times before winning:

> *It is not the first time we applied for this special grant but we also applied before when I was in another group but we did not benefit but this time we got it due to good luck and we are happy for it. (Group Member)*

> *… at times we apply and don't get like three times. The officers at the district tell us that sometimes that money comes when it is little. So, they cannot give a group many times yet they are those that have never got anything. (Group Member)*

For the groups that received the grant, a demotivating factor was being awarded a grant amount less than what they applied for. Coupled with the *unofficial costs* that some groups incurred in form of kickbacks to lobbyists, receiving less than the amount applied for was discouraging: You get the money after waiting for a long time and you get less than you anticipated because what you apply for is not what you are given." (Group Member)

According to the district officials, part of the grant remitted to districts was designated for administrative costs of the district grant committee. The balance is what is awarded to groups that apply:

> *Averagely, every quarter I find myself with 30 groups to share 4m because I receive 5m then 1m is for the grants committee. I have a committee of ten people which is chaired by the CAO, so we sit and use 10% of whatever we receive to facilitate that grants committee. (Community Development Officer)*

3.2 Grant Utilization

The grant amount, as little as it may be, was reduced furthermore by distributing to several channels of direct and indirect expenses, i.e. administration (10%) and monitoring (5%). You would find that a group of 15 members applied for 1.5 million shillings but received less than one million shillings.

Every group has an executive committee comprising about 9 members each taking home some amount (about) twenty thousand shillings, probably after meetings or other project engagements. This excluded kickbacks to those who lobbied or offered technical assistance with moving paperwork. It also excluded the costs of other application processing expenses like transportation that may be reimbursed.

> *We got 450,000 and we shared it amongst ourselves and everyone got 30,000=. After sharing it some people invested in poultry, others in piggery and only one person added it in her grocery business." (Group Member)*

> *We got only 1m though we had applied for 1.5 million shillings." (Special Grant Group Member)*

> *We have so far got money three times: the first time we got 1m, second time, 1m and the third time we got 800,000 shillings. (Special Grant Group Member)*

Although the groups comprised many individuals, usually when they acquired the money, they endeavored to put it to the intended use. Groups bought sewing machines, while others ventured into saloon business, phone repair, and farming. Some groups chose to invest their funds into revolving loan businesses.

> *Because the money was little, we agreed as a group. We bought 12 sheep and distributed them to some members, and we agreed that as they multiply, they will be distributed to other members." (Special Grant Group Member)*

> *…as I said earlier, we had started our capital of revolving loan, so when we got that money, we added it on what we already had and members borrowed it. As I talk now, we have like 3.5 million or more. (Special grant group member)*

> *We bought two sewing machines and we remained with a balance of 400,000. What remained is what we used to put up the shelter for our animal. (Group member)*

It also emerged that the special grant benefited not only persons with disabilities who are the legitimate direct target beneficiaries but also older persons. This could be because older persons and disability at the Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development belong to one department:

> *Since the elderly entered the district council the government has decided to combine the elderly and the persons with disabilities and we are sharing that very little fund. (District Union branch representative)*

In sum, the special grant was remitted to districts and municipalities in four quarterly installments. Competition for the grant was stiff hence many of the groups applied multiple times before receiving their first grant, while some gave up on reapplying upon multiple rejections. Grant awards were influenced by a combination of technical assessment and use of lobbyists with good connections. Groups hardly received the amounts they applied for, and often had to forfeit the little they received in form of kickbacks and application processing expenses. Generally, districts had very limited funds available for groups because the special grant remittances from the central government to the districts fluctuated downwards every subsequent financial year.

3.3 Entrepreneurial initiatives

By design, the special grant is intended as a startup fund for groups of persons with disabilities to start and manage small businesses. The present study revealed that the grant amounts awarded to the groups dictated the size and type of businesses the groups initiated, and the profit margin they earned from the businesses. All the groups in the study carried out small-scale businesses that yielded low to no profits. In order of frequency, the commonest businesses were animal rearing, charcoal sale, tailoring, revolving loans, hair dressing, and electronic repairs.

Many of the special grant groups in the study districts carried out animal rearing projects. The types of animals reared were goats, sheep, chicken and pigs. The choice of animal rearing over other projects was for various reasons: perceived ease of management, low initial capital, and profitability. In particular, the groups that chose piggery explained that pigs tend to fetch a lot of money in a short time due to their high reproduction rates, while poultry keeping was chosen because of the low capital it required and the relative ease of sustaining it: ‘’pigs fetch a lot of money when you sell. That is why we opted for it’’ (Group member). Meanwhile, poultry was chosen for its relative ease of management: ‘’I choose poultry because chicken is easier to rear compared to pigs. For example, they can feed themselves (free range system) unlike the pigs.’’(Group member).

Interestingly, all the animal rearing projects were individually owned as opposed to the grant’s requirement of group owned income generating activities. This means that the groups shared their grant funds to members who then decided which projects they wanted. The choice of projects was dictated not so much by what they wanted to do but by what the money they received could afford. Typically, the amounts received were inadequate to start a meaningful group or individual business, as some individuals had to top up:

> *‘’I topped up and bought a piglet “(group member), while those who could not top up the money, they received from the group resorted to projects that their grant*

> *amount could afford: "for my case I could not raise more money to top up, so I went and bought three hens.'' (Group member).*

Charcoal business turned out cumbersome for those who attempted it. One of the groups reported dropping it because it turned out difficulty to manage by themselves without hiring someone else to do it: "the person who was helping us to run the business also had family problems, sometimes came late, and the business kept reducing in stock." (Group member).

Revolving loans, tailoring and hair dressing were the other businesses ventures the groups undertook. The primary reason for opting for the revolving loan was the profit associated with it: "when we started the revolving loan, you see that we are making some progress. If we didn't have this revolving loan, some of our individual small projects would collapse" (Group member). In addition to generating profits, revolving loans were relatively more manageable for groups with literate members capable of keeping proper and transparent records of borrowing and interests earned. A downside to it was its proneness to collapse should some members fail to meet their loan repayment obligations. It was not clear how loan repayment was enforced but the participating groups urged for more funds to boost their revolving loan business.

3.4 Operational dilemmas

The study revealed that management of the special grant was fraught with significant implementation challenges affecting its disbursement and monitoring. District officials disclosed that the district committees were not facilitated to monitor the utilization of the funds by the beneficiary groups. As such, monitoring was hardly done on phone:

> *…generally, they don't visit us, you will forgive me, it is not like we are reporting them. Of course, officers who work on these things, automatically when they come to the group they expect to get fuel (from the group). So, when they realize the group cannot raise money for fuel they don't visit it". (Group member)*

> *…we don't have the fund to go and monitor that money and follow them; we just send the money, so you cannot be sure whether that money is still in existence. (District official)*

It is not that the grant did not cover monitoring per se, but the proportion of the funds (5%) designated for monitoring was meagre. In most cases, the 5% was spent on allowances to the district grant committee when they convened meetings to scrutinize, select and approve the groups that should benefit from the grant and no funds remained to facilitate the monitoring of projects:

> *The other problem is that the administration cost is only 5% of the total. You can imagine if you are getting like four million shillings, how much is 5% to give allowances to the special grants committee to distribute money in the community and also to do monitoring? We rarely go because of little money. (District official)*

Nonetheless, some district officials carried out what they called ''integrated monitoring'' whereby they used the budget for monitoring mainstream livelihoods programs such as the Youth Livelihood Program to also check on how the special grant groups were utilizing funds disbursed to them. However, not all the districts embraced integrated monitoring since the budget for the mainstream programs were also limited. This raises a question about the authenticity of the monitoring reports that districts submit to the center since monitoring was a big challenge.

On a positive note, some groups acknowledged the technical guidance offered by the district technical team in drafting group constitution, filling application and opening bank accounts prior to receiving the grant. This denotes that support was only offered to groups to access the grant and very little or possibly nothing was done to monitor utilization after disbursement: "...our CDO helps us; he has been there for us on the proposal. We write the proposal but where there is a mistake he guides us. Even the Constitution; it is the community development officer (CDO) who drafted it for us." (Group member)

3.5 Income empowerment

The ultimate goal of the special grant is empowering persons with disabilities to start and sustain income generating activities and improve their livelihood. One of this study's objectives was to explore what difference the special grant made on its beneficiaries. Study findings revealed that the extent of empowerment varied from group to group depending on the grant amount received, the number of times the grant was received and the size of the group. Groups with many members that received little money reported negligible improvement in their livelihoods because of the special grant as the grants received were insufficient to start viable income generating activities. Moreover, as most groups received less funds than they applied for, the grant amount would be shared amongst the group members making it too little to initiate a meaningful income generating project. Some members struggled to top-up and those who could not afford to top-up opted for smaller projects with minimal impact: ''…the money is very little because we have many needs as you see, we applied for 1 million but they gave us 450,000. (Group member)

Disbursing small grant amounts to large groups made it extremely difficult for all the group members to get a share of the grant. It emerged that some groups decided to purchase animals and gave the animals to a few members since they were never enough to cover all the members at once. The other group members were to wait for the animals to reproduce to get their share. At the time of this study, many group members had not got their share as they were patiently waiting for the animals to mature and reproduce:

> *…the impact is not very quick, it is not, you know it takes time actually because some of the groups prefer goat rearing; so, you find a group of 30 people is given five goats so it takes very many years for every member to have a goat. Because we give in a group of 30 members, we give five goats to five members so that when that goat produces, a member gives a kid to another member and then other members must wait for that kid to grow and produce so that he can get a kid as well. So, the growth cannot easily be detected." (District official)*

It is worth acknowledging the contribution the grant made in the lives of persons with disabilities though. Some groups credited the special grant for enabling them to start vocational training centers. It was evident that some groups after accessing the grant, initiated and others expanded vocational skills training centers for their children and other community members. For instance, in the group saloon, they would plait hair as their primary activity and at the same time enrolled two to four learners from amongst the group members, their children or other learners from the community to be trained in hairdressing. The skills acquired included typing, tailoring, hair dressing among others:

> *"… because we had two sewing machines by the time we applied for the grant, but I think you have seen yourself that we are moving, we have managed to keep adding." (Group member)*

No matter the scale of businesses initiated, beneficiary group members acknowledge that it made a difference. Some members used the money earned from their small businesses to buy school supplies for their children, while some said the grant enabled them to be independent like their counterparts without disabilities:

> *..we are now able to at least generate some income which has made us to upgrade from begging money from different shops, market and any other passersby in to doing our own income generating activities which has made us independent. (Group member)*

> *…we are able to start the goats keeping project and I think if these goats reproduce, each member will have something so we can sell these goats and take the money to the school, or school fees for our children or you could use the money to energize your business as a person so I would say this special grant money has helped a lot. (Group member)*

Positively, the special grant enabled persons with disabilities to gain recognition in their communities. This may have indirectly contributed to dispelling negative perceptions held by the community towards persons with disabilities. Contrary to the long held incorrect perception that persons with disabilities are useless and/or a burden to society, special grant participants reported a significant change in accepting and respecting them since the small businesses facilitated their wellbeing and independence.

Relatedly, participants revealed extending their social networks beyond family circles as a result of the special grant. Group formation, a pre-requisite to accessing the grant brought together many persons with disabilities for the first time, fostering in them a sense of belonging, self-confidence and building a social support network.

> *"We have known one another as persons with disabilities and we are known in this community as people who are able to work and change our lives." (Group member)*

> *"We are now able to at least generate some income which has made us to upgrade from begging money into doing our own income generating activities which has made us independent." (Group member)*

The special grant instilled a culture of responsible saving, borrowing and loan repayment among the members that initiated revolving loan business. Group savings ranged from Uganda shillings 1,000 to 5,000 per person in the group. Participants reported compliance to the rules of mandatory saving despite the many pressing needs. Those who get loans from the group injected it in individual income generating projects, paying school fees for their children, and/or medical bills: "…the saving that we are making is really helpful because once we share the savings, we have some money and some people can take their children to school and pay their tuitions. I say that is really helpful." (Group member)

3.6 Disability related expenses

For some beneficiaries, accessing the grant was a costly and tedious process that required money and a lot of energy in terms of several movements to register a group, opening bank account, and submitting grant application forms to districts. Unfortunately, the district special grant did not cover disability related costs such as the cost of assistive devices, personal assistants, sign language interpreters, sighted guide. The several movements coupled with inaccessible physical environments and lack of assistive devices made it extremely difficult for persons with disabilities to fulfill all the requirements for accessing the grant. Making several movements also implied incurring extra costs in transport fare some of which was borrowed money:

> *The first challenge was that of transport, because we would go to the district to meet officers but we bounce that they are in the field, sometimes in meetings. The little you had solicited from members has been spent but you have not been successful. So we would come back and solicit again. (Group member)*

> *Sometimes they tell you we borrowed money for processing those documents and now the money has delayed. The owner of the money is pestering us for his/her money …. People even try to tell you of selling a plot that their parents have given them. (District official)*

> *Walking here, there going back home and returning can be very challenging for the person who is visually impaired so some people just resign and leave the whole things. (Group member)*

3.7 The cost of illiteracy

Illiteracy of group members was a significant bottle neck to the special grant access and utilization. Some groups outsourced assistance at a fee to write group constitutions, develop a business plans, register group and handle the paperwork involved in the grant application process. Failing or delaying to register a group or not submitting the grant application in time costed certain groups missing out or forfeit some parts of the grant awarded to them to pay for help with grant application.

> *…most of them don't have capacity of writing the proposal and then also coming up with the constitution is a very big challenge to them. Most of them cannot write and cannot read, so everything they have to hire." (District official)*

> *For the first time we applied for the special grant and we did not get it, the reason we did not get it is that our registration status was not complete so as a result we missed the grant. For the second time we completed the registration, awarded certificate and we got the grant." (Group member)*

4. Discussion and Implications

4.1 Costly Grant Application Process

This study investigated the experiences of persons with disabilities in accessing and utilizing the special grant, their motivation for accessing the grant and the grant's benefits of to its beneficiaries. Generally, persons with disabilities went through avoidable a long application process to access the district special grant. The process involved registering a group, generating tax identification numbers, a one year mandatory life span prior to application, constitution writing, writing a business plan, and submitting application to district headquarters. Groups that were finally approved to access the funds had to wait a long time from approval to get the money in bank accounts. Some groups that failed to access the grant in their first attempts gave up on reapplying because of the tedious and expensive application process. The findings from this study are consistent with a report by the National Council for Persons with Disabilities (2018) which also reported that special grant groups experienced immense difficulties navigating administrative requirements like registering groups, developing business plans, opening bank accounts, and existing for one year at the time of application. It appears that the special grant subjected it's applicants to stricter application requirements than the mainstream livelihood programs like youth livelihood program (ibid).

4.2 The supply-demand imbalance

Evidently, grant remittances to districts and disbursements to beneficiaries did not meet the high demand for the grant by persons with disabilities. On the one hand, districts received overwhelming numbers of applicants and on the other hand meager remittances which delayed and fluctuated every financial year. The responsible ministry acknowledges in the National Policy on Disability that districts received far more applications than they are able to fund (Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development, 2023). Delays in remitting the grant and fluctuation in grant amounts were critical bottle necks also reported by the National Council for Persons with Disabilities (2018). Persons with disabilities wishing to start businesses should be accorded the opportunity by offering them the required resources (Harris et al. (2013) and Renko et al., 2016), and it is the responsibility of government to reduce disincentives that curtail persons with disabilities from playing an entrepreneurial role (Parker Harris et al., 2014).

Ultimately, targeting a larger number of grant beneficiaries calls for commensurate financial commitment on the side of the government. This may appear costly in the short run but efficient or lower than 1% of Gross Domestic Product (UNICEF, 2017). This argument makes sense when factoring in the benefits accruable from anticipated reduction in poverty and dependency, improved wellbeing and independence and increased acceptance of persons with disabilities. The income and social dividends associated with the special grant justify the need to sustain it as a standalone disability grant. Grouping persons with disabilities under mainstream socio-economic empowerment programs tends to obscure the unique and intersectional needs of persons with disabilities (Development Pathways, 2022).

4.3 Deviations from implementation guidelines

The ways in which the study districts administered the grant and how groups utilized the grants disbursed to them revealed several deviations that may have affected the realization of the desired goal of the grant. Firstly, the grant was intended for groups of 5-15 members to startup group businesses, not for individuals, but half of the groups in this study were 2 to 4 times bigger than the official maximum group size of 15. A big group was problematic in that grant disbursement was not necessarily proportionate to group size. A group with many members can be difficult to manage, besides having to share a small grant amount.

Given the small grant amounts, some groups opted to distribute their money among themselves instead of using it for a group project. Distributing the funds to start individual projects contravened the guidelines that requires groups to operate joint enterprises. This practice reveals three things: first, the lack of monitoring and follow up by responsible offices from the center and the district means that such deviations were not detected and corrected in time. Second, it is an indication that the groups were not aware of this guideline or are aware but compelled otherwise. Third, the practice signals the possibility that group level income generating activities may not be the most business model for supporting persons with disabilities since the groups would resort to sharing the grant individually.

According to the guidelines, the grant amount per group is UGX 5 million shillings, but none of the study groups received this amount. There were wide ranging disparities in the grant amounts disbursed to groups, with some groups awarded 5 times less. Moreover, contrary to the guidelines, districts disbursed funds annually instead of quarterly, in order to accumulate the funds and award to more groups at once.

The guideline on training groups prior to awarding them a grant was barely done as groups resorted to relying on their group executives. Namatovu et al. (2012) found out that a majority of the self-employed persons with disabilities in Uganda lacked skills on how to start and run their businesses. The absence of training for intending entrepreneurs downplays the fact that right skills, proficiencies and motivation facilitate persons with disabilities to take on an entrepreneurial role at the same level with their counterparts without disabilities (Griffin et al., 2014; Shaheen, 2016).

4.4 The difference the grant made

The contribution of the special grant though admittedly limited given the small grant amounts and business, cannot be downplayed. The economic dividends from the businesses may have been negligible especially from small individual businesses initiated with limited startup capital. Kalanzi (2014) noted that the special grant had to a less extent contributed to economic improvement of persons with disabilities. Group members reported non-financial benefits such as widening their social capital base through associating with fellow persons with disabilities, gaining recognition in society as well as change in the attitudes of the community towards persons with disabilities.

4.5 Remodeling effect of the national special grant

The biggest thrust against the district special grant was introducing a competing and better funded model of implementation called the national special grant. The national special grant model was implemented alongside the district grant, creating confusion, disincentives and a stalemate on the underfunded district special grant. Since introducing the national special grant in 2019, government's financial commitment exponentially increased from 2.4 billion to 16.6 billion within four financial years. Meanwhile, access to the special grant significantly increased since the introduction of the national special grant. The number of funded enterprises for groups of persons with disabilities under the national special grant increased from 168 enterprises in FY 2019/20 to 1,612 enterprises in FY 2021/2022[1]. By FY 2021/2022 when this study was concluded, the number of persons with disabilities accessing the special grant had exponentially increased from 1,445 in 2019/20 FY to 13,615 in 202/22 with more females (58%) than males (42%).

It is not surprising that the national special grant registered far more achievements within a much shorter implementation duration than the district special grant. As it stands, the district special grant has been phased out and its funds redirected towards monitoring, while the budget for the national special grant was drastically reduced by 50% in FY 2024/2025. The budget cut is reversal of the gains of the special grant and will likely affect the sustainability and impact potential of the special grant on the lives of persons with disabilities.

5. Conclusion

The experiences of persons with disabilities in accessing and utilizing the district special grant as presented in this study highlight critical challenges that impeded effective implementation. Lessons from the district special grant reveal some critical concerns: equity in access and appropriate implementation model. On equitable access to the grant by different persons with disabilities, persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities were not among the beneficiaries of the group in this study. This is a pointer to the possibility that persons with significant disabilities are being left behind in the special grant. It appears that there is elitism within the special grant beneficiaries, a situation where the less vulnerable and literate persons with disabilities dominate the grant and possibly manipulate those who are illiterate and/or with significant disabilities.

The second concern that emerges from this study is the group vs individual grant awards. District special grant participants tended to opt for sharing money and starting individual business instead of starting joint businesses as stipulated in the grant

[1]Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (2022).

guidelines. This can be a tacit endorsement of an individual model as opposed to a group-based model. Awarding grants to persons with disabilities in groups is inherently problematic in terms membership selection, variations in entrepreneurial ideas, commitment and unity of purpose, and sharing dividends, let alone accountable leadership (by group executives). Moreover, small grant amounts awarded to big size groups turned out not enough to finance impactful business initiatives.

While increasing the national special grant funding to 16 billion in FY 2023/24 was an impressive gesture of commitment on the side of the government, reducing the special budget by 50% in 2024/25 FY was a reversal of the this commitment and may result in a potentially negative backlash. Given that there is no disability-specific social protection scheme for persons with disabilities, the special grant could be remodeled into a social protection benefits scheme awarded to individuals with disabilities in the same way it is done with the social assistance grant for empowerment (SAGE). Importantly, disability related expenses incurred by grant beneficiaries such as the cost for personal assistant services and/or assistive devices should be factored into grant awards.

6. Limitations

The findings of this study should be interpreted with caution due to certain methodological limitations and remodeling of the special grant that occurred after this study. While this study's findings provide a realistic picture of what could be happening across special grant groups, the findings are not representative since it covered only 10 groups from 6 districts. Secondly, this study adopted a purely qualitative research approach using individual and focus group interviews to collect data. Whereas it elicited in-depth first persons' perspectives, a nationally representative picture would have been possible using mixed methods, bigger sample and wider coverage. Future research studies should consider a national level evaluation of the performance and impact of the national special grant.

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