East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences, Volume 8, Issue 2, 2025
Article DOI : https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.2.2986

East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences
eajass.eanso.org
Volume 8, Issue 2, 2025
Print ISSN: 2707-4277 | Online ISSN: 2707-4285
Title DOI: https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-4285

EAST AFRICAN NATURE & SCIENCE ORGANIZATION

Original Article

Economic Impacts of the Declining Sugar Industry on Livelihoods at the Household Level in the Context of Western Kenya

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Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.2.2986

Date Published:

09 May 2025

Keywords:

Economic Impacts, Sugar Industry, Livelihoods, Household, Western Kenya.

ABSTRACT

In Western Kenya, the sugar industry used to be a major economic pillar that had a big impact on household incomes. However, there have been significant economic repercussions from its collapse in recent decades. The economic effects of the region's dwindling sugar industry on household incomes are examined in this study. The study used a phenomenological research approach, guided by the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach and the Social Role Theory of Sex Differences and Similarities (Eagly & Wood, 2012). In-depth interviews, focus groups, key informant interviews, observations, and field notes were used to gather data from 36 families located in the Mumias, Nzoia, West Kenya, and Busia sugar belt zones. After conducting a thematic analysis, the information was presented in the participants' exact words (verbatim). Results show that widespread poverty, unemployment, food insecurity, and land fragmentation have resulted from the sugar industry's downfall. There have also been reports of a rise in domestic disputes, criminality, tension, and cane cutter migration. Alternative livelihood techniques like table banking, casual work, microenterprise operations, and community efforts have become necessary for many households. In addition to negative coping strategies like substance abuse and relationship strain, some upper-class people have turned to investing in enterprises and rental properties. The study concludes that 80% of household incomes have been affected by the sugar industry's economic crisis, which has resulted in financial instability and a rise in social difficulties. It recommends that Kenya’s policies on rural livelihoods and poverty reduction prioritise financial investment in agricultural development and human capital to support alternative income-generating activities.

Article DOI : https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.2.2986

APA CITATION

Ambasa, D. M. & Calistus, L. A. (2025). Economic Impacts of the Declining Sugar Industry on Livelihoods at the Household Level in the Context of Western Kenya. *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences, 8*(*2*), 78-97. https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.2.2986

CHICAGO CITATION

Ambasa, Doris Molly and Luhombo Adema Calistus. 2025. "Economic Impacts of the Declining Sugar Industry on Livelihoods at the Household Level in the Context of Western Kenya". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 8 (2), 78-97. https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.2.2986

HARVARD CITATION

Ambasa, D. M. & Calistus, L. A. (2025) "Economic Impacts of the Declining Sugar Industry on Livelihoods at the Household Level in the Context of Western Kenya". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 8(2), pp. 78-97. doi: 10.37284/eajass.8.2.2986

IEEE CITATION

D. M., Ambasa & L. A., Calistus "Economic Impacts of the Declining Sugar Industry on Livelihoods at the Household Level in the Context of Western Kenya". *EAJASS*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 78-97, May. 2025.

MLA CITATION

Ambasa, Doris Molly & Luhombo Adema Calistus. "Economic Impacts of the Declining Sugar Industry on Livelihoods at the Household Level in the Context of Western Kenya". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, Vol. 8, no. 2, May. 2025, pp. 78-97, doi:10.37284/eajass.8.1.2986

INTRODUCTION

In the past, the sugar industry has been essential to Kenya's economy, especially in Western Kenya, where it has provided jobs, trade, and agribusiness for millions of people. With direct and indirect jobs for farmers, millers, transporters, and other stakeholders, the sector was a major contributor to economic stability at its height. Poor sugarcane farming methods, growing production costs, inefficient factories, and heightened competition from sugar imports under trade agreements like the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) have all contributed to the industry's dramatic decline in recent decades. Sugarcane farmers have been adversely impacted by these difficulties, which have decreased their revenue levels and jeopardised their livelihoods.

In Western Kenya, household well-being has been directly impacted by the sugar industry's economic downturn. Due to poor pricing, high production expenses, and delayed payments, many smallholder farmers have given up growing sugarcane, creating economic instability. Once-sugarcane-dependent households have been forced to diversify into other sources of income, such as small-scale enterprises, part-time work, and informal sector pursuits. With changes in gender roles, family structures, and economic distribution, the shift has also upset household dynamics.

Even though the sugar business has a significant role in determining household incomes, most research to date has concentrated on production and management issues rather than the socioeconomic impacts on households. By examining the changes in household income, employment, and coping mechanisms, as well as the economic effects of the industry's decline on household livelihoods, this study aims to close this gap. Developing strategies that can assist rural households in adjusting to the changing economic environment requires an understanding of these effects.

Study Questions

This study attempted to answer the following question

How are livelihoods influenced by economic changes at the household level in Western Kenya?

Justification of the Study

Since many families in Western Kenya rely on sugarcane growing for their livelihoods, the declining state of the sugar sector has had a major economic impact, especially at the family level. Poor living conditions, lost job possibilities, and

Article DOI : https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.2.2986

heightened household vulnerability have resulted from the ensuing financial instability. Investigating the wider economic impacts of the industry's decline on household livelihoods is therefore imperative.

It is anticipated that the results of this study would influence the creation of policies pertaining to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8, which calls for the promotion of productive employment, decent work for all, and sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth. Discussions on African Union Aspiration 1, which aims to create a prosperous continent founded on sustainable development and inclusive prosperity, can also benefit from insights gained from Western Kenya's experiences. The study's conclusions may also have an impact on policies that support the Big 4 Agenda on manufacturing and Kenya's Vision 2030 (Agenda 4) on value addition, which aim to raise yearly GDP growth and improve livelihoods.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study would contribute valuable insights to various institutions, non-governmental organisations, and individuals at the household level by addressing the economic impacts of the declining sugar industry on livelihoods in Western Kenya.

i) **Policy Implications** – It is anticipated that the results of this study will influence the creation of Sust-related policies. The study will help stakeholders and legislators create more sensible laws that specifically address the issues faced by small-scale sugarcane growers. In order to slow the sector's economic deterioration, it promotes group and participatory methods as opposed to top-down state measures.

ii) **Household Economic Stability** – For households facing economic decline as a result of the declining sugar sector, the findings might provide useful answers. The project intends to give methods for poverty alleviation, improved livelihoods, and a better understanding of altering gender roles within affected households by identifying possibilities and obstacles.

iii) **Support for Livelihood Diversification** – Knowledge of new livelihood options could help social workers, community development professionals, rural development workers, and agricultural specialists create and carry out gender-sensitive, sustainable, and varied initiatives to help impacted households.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

The analysis of the financial effects of the dwindling sugar sector on household incomes in Western Kenya is the specific subject of this study. Owing to the sample's purposeful design, the results are based on the actual experiences of households in this location and might not apply to other places where single-crop economies are declining. Data for the study was mostly gathered through interviews, which are by their very nature subjective. In order to guarantee data triangulation and improve the trustworthiness of the results, this constraint was lessened by combining participant observations, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs). Notwithstanding these initiatives, the outcomes might not be generally relevant to other households dealing with comparable livelihood difficulties. Some participants first misinterpreted the study's goal during data collection in the Busia sugar belt zone, thinking it was a consultative meeting about the Mumias Sugar Company's revival. To guarantee accurate data collection, the researcher did, however, make clear the purpose of the study. Furthermore, a scheduled FGD in Malava Township was interrupted when a local sub-chief refused to answer the researcher's calls in spite of previous agreements. An alternate FGD was successfully organised in the same place as a result of continuous follow-ups with the local chief, who helped to establish a relationship with a village elder.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Livelihood diversification is a key strategy for rural households seeking to increase their income and cope with economic challenges. Many smallholders

Article DOI : https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.2.2986

in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) engage in both farm and nonfarm activities as a means of reducing vulnerabilities and enhancing their overall security (Ellis, 2000b). Diversification serves as a response to poverty and risks associated with agriculture, providing alternative income sources that help households improve their livelihoods (Yaro, 2006). Given the decline in agricultural productivity and economic uncertainties in SSA, smallholder farmers are increasingly turning to nonfarm income-generating activities as a means of survival (Barrett et al., 2001).

The decline in agricultural productivity has had significant effects on household livelihoods. Shrinking farm sizes and limited agricultural opportunities have forced many rural labourers into low-return nonfarm sectors, often leading to economic hardship (Haggblade et al., 2007; Headey & Jayne, 2014). Households that rely heavily on smallholder farming are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity and economic distress, necessitating the adoption of alternative livelihood strategies to sustain their families (Jirström et al., 2010; Losch et al., 2012). Unlike other regions where urbanisation has been accompanied by industrialisation, economic transformation in SSA has been characterised by rapid urbanisation without corresponding industrial growth. This has resulted in limited employment opportunities outside agriculture, further constraining livelihood options for rural households (Andersson Djurfeldt, 2015; Losch et al., 2012).

Livelihood transitions present both challenges and opportunities for rural households. Poor households with limited assets often resort to low-return or risky livelihood strategies due to a lack of viable alternatives, whereas wealthier households are better positioned to diversify into more profitable opportunities (Barrett et al., 2001; Haggblade et al., 2007). Migration and remittances continue to be vital for maintaining rural livelihoods in areas with inadequate local economic diversification (World Bank, 2007). Uneven results, however, have been caused by systemic disparities in access to economic possibilities; some households are able to transcend poverty, while others continue to face persistent financial difficulties (Losch et al., 2012). The World Bank (2024) suggests a strategy focus on the "3i" framework to address these disparities: Innovation to increase access to new markets and technologies; Insurance to protect vulnerable people against economic shocks; and Investment in inclusive infrastructure and human capital. Promoting equitable rural development and creating long-term routes out of poverty require these actions.

A significant gap in the existing literature is the reliance on cross-sectional data, which often fails to capture the deeper, lived experiences of rural households facing economic decline. Many studies have focused on statistical analyses rather than exploring the perceptions, challenges, and coping strategies of affected communities. There is a need for phenomenological research to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how declining agricultural economies impact household livelihoods and the adaptive strategies employed by affected families. This approach would offer valuable insights into the lived experiences of smallholder farmers and contribute to the development of more effective policy interventions.

Livelihood strategies are shaped by a combination of assets, activities, and external structures that influence rural households' choices (Ellis, 2000). Households employ various livelihood strategies, such as agricultural intensification, diversification, and migration, to sustain their well-being (Barrett et al., 2001). Push factors, including climate uncertainty, land constraints, and poor infrastructure, force households to seek alternative income sources as survival mechanisms (Scoones, 2015). Conversely, pull factors like improved market access, commercialisation of agriculture, and education encourage households to pursue more profitable livelihood options (Reardon et al., 2007). Diversification is categorised as either survival-led,

Article DOI : https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.2.2986

where poorer households engage in low-return activities out of necessity, or opportunity-led, where wealthier households seek high-return investments for wealth accumulation (Ellis, 1998).

Research indicates that nonfarm income diversification positively impacts household welfare, increasing income levels, consumption, and food security (Haggblade et al., 2010). However, access to high-return nonfarm activities is often restricted to wealthier households due to barriers such as education, skills, and financial capital (Dercon & Krishnan, 1996). Studies from various African countries, including Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, and Senegal, show that nonfarm incomes contribute to farm productivity by enabling investments in agricultural inputs and assets (Reardon et al., 2001). While wealthier households benefit more from diversification, poorer households rely on low-return activities with minimal income growth potential, reinforcing existing economic disparities (Barrett et al., 2019).

Several factors influence livelihood strategy choices, including geographic location, household demographics, financial resources, and social networks (Ellis, 2000). Households with access to credit, remittances, cooperatives, and education are more likely to diversify successfully (Haggblade et al., 2010). Studies in China and Nepal confirm that factors such as household size, education, and landholding significantly impact livelihood decisions (Ellis & Biggs, 2001). Ultimately, rural households diversify both voluntarily, seeking economic opportunities, and involuntarily, responding to external shocks. The balance between push and pull factors determines whether diversification serves as a survival mechanism or a means of upward mobility in rural economies (Scoones, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the **Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF)**, which provides a comprehensive approach to understanding how households sustain their livelihoods amid economic and environmental challenges. The **SLF** is particularly relevant for analysing the effects of the declining sugar industry on rural livelihoods in Western Kenya. The framework enables an in-depth examination of the assets, vulnerabilities, structures, processes, strategies, and outcomes that shape livelihoods in this region.

Sustainable Livelihoods Framework

The concept of sustainable livelihood originated from a growing understanding of poverty dynamics, as explored by Sen (1993) and Chambers & Conway (1992). It represents a paradigm shift in development thinking, emphasising the importance of livelihood diversification and resilience-building strategies (Sustainability, 2018). Among the various approaches, the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) developed by the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID, 1999) is widely recognised and applied in livelihood research. This study adopts the SLF to assess the implications of the declining sugar industry on rural households in Western Kenya.

According to **DFID (1999)**, the SLF comprises five key components that shape livelihoods:

- **Vulnerability Context** – This refers to external factors such as economic shocks, climate variability, and policy changes that impact livelihood stability (Devereux, 2001). In the context of this study, the **declining sugar industry** represents a major vulnerability factor affecting farmers and other stakeholders in the sugar value chain.

- **Livelihood Assets** – These consist of **human, natural, physical, financial, and social capital**, which households utilise to sustain their livelihoods (Land, 2021). The study examines how the decline of the sugar industry has affected access to these assets and how households are adapting.

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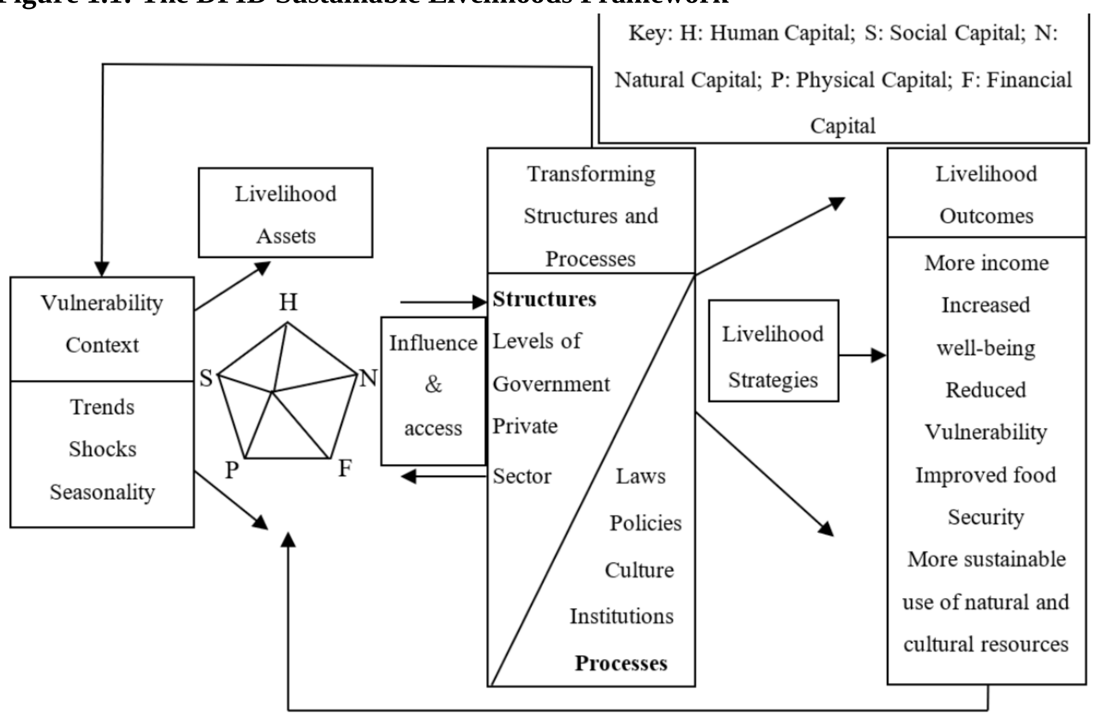
- **Transforming Structures and Processes** – These include institutions, policies, and governance structures that influence access to resources and economic opportunities (DFID, 1999). Government policies on sugar industry regulation, market access, and rural development play a crucial role in shaping farmers' livelihoods.
- **Livelihood Strategies** – Households develop various livelihood strategies to cope with economic changes. In this study, alternative income-generating activities and diversification strategies among sugarcane farmers are analysed to understand their adaptability and resilience.
- **Livelihood Outcomes** – These represent the results of livelihood strategies, such as improved income, food security, and well-being (DFID, 1999). The study evaluates how changes in the sugar industry impact the overall quality of life in rural households.

The SLF provides a systematic and adaptable tool for analysing rural livelihoods, making it particularly suitable for addressing the first and third objectives of this study. By focusing on household assets, vulnerabilities, and coping mechanisms, the framework offers insights into how rural communities are responding to the challenges posed by the decline of the sugar industry. Additionally, the qualitative methodology of this study aligns with the SLF's participatory approach, allowing for a deeper understanding of household experiences and strategies.

Figure 1.1: The DFID Sustainable Livelihoods Framework



(Adapted from DFID [1999]

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a phenomenological research design, which is qualitative and experiential in nature. Phenomenology focuses on understanding

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human experiences and how individuals interpret and derive meaning from their lived realities (Moran, 2001; Groenewald, 2004). Given the research objectives, this design was appropriate for exploring how households in Western Kenya experience and respond to the declining sugar industry.

The study engaged household heads and their wives through face-to-face interactions to gather insights into the effects of the declining sugar industry on livelihoods, gender role reconstruction, and household coping strategies. This approach allowed participants to share firsthand experiences regarding economic changes and adaptation strategies. Through comprehensive descriptions, the study sought to uncover the deeper cognitive and social processes influencing livelihood adjustments.

Additionally, bracketing—which involves setting aside personal biases—was applied to ensure that the research findings objectively captured participants' true experiences (Laverty, 2003). The phenomenological design was therefore suitable for addressing the study's first and third objectives, as it provided a rich, detailed exploration of household experiences and coping mechanisms in response to economic decline.

Target Population

The target population consisted of household heads and wife/wives whose livelihoods depend on the sugar industry as their major source of income and livelihood in Western Kenya. Based on these households, it was possible to share their views and experiences on the declining sugar industry and its effects on their livelihoods and the region as a whole. They also shared their norms, values and perceptions on the changing gender roles at the household level due to transitional economic changes in the region. They also shared their insights and coping strategies they have adopted to sustain their livelihoods at the household level.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

The study comprised 36 (thirty-six) households where 15(fifteen) households were purposely selected from the Mumias sugar belt zone and 7 (seven) households selected from each sugar belt of Nzoia, West Kenya and Busia. Out of that, 34 (thirty-four) men and 52(fifty-two) women were interviewed. The sample size was assumed to be large enough, as phenomenological design deals with small convenience samples (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2009), arguing that, in an in-depth interview, a small sample provides depth by interviewing a limited number of information-rich participants. Moreover, choosing a small subset sample size reduces time cost and accessibility, which often prohibits the collection of data from every member or about every item (Lewin, 2005). Conducting research among the entire population can be time-consuming and costly. According to (Spring, 2007), most research conducted among human beings, places and things focuses on a small sample size, as the chances of studying the whole population are limited. Therefore, a representative sample of the population is selected, and the information gathered from the selected sample is used as data (Spring, 2007)

The study applied purposive sampling where eligible households were purposely identified based on their reliance on sugarcane farming as their major source of income and livelihood, and their knowledge, experience and understanding of the declining sugar industry in the region. Selection was done one week before the commencement of the data collection process, and reconfirmation of the households' participation through the village elders a day before. The study engaged household heads and their wife/ wives in case of polygamous families on the effects of the declining sugar industry on their livelihoods and gender roles in their homes, and how they were coping with the economic changes in the region.

Pilot Study

In this study, data collection methods were pre-tested by administering them to a group of men and

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women in Matayos Sub County in the Busia sugar belt zone. The aim of the pilot study was to ascertain that the questions were clear and to establish the general attitude of the participants. Any misleading questions in the interview schedule and FGDs that were ambiguous were modified to suit the study. Pilot testing also helped the researcher to estimate how long the actual data collection process would take.

Data Collection Methods

A qualitative research method was employed in this study to gain an in-depth and interpretive understanding of the effects of the declining sugar industry on household livelihoods, gender roles, and coping strategies in Western Kenya. This approach enabled participants to narrate their experiences, perspectives, and life histories through interactions with researchers (Ritchie et al., 2013). Qualitative research studies phenomena in their natural settings, allowing for the interpretation of meanings and social processes that are not measurable through experimental methods (Maxwell, 2004). Through in-depth interviews with household heads and wives, the study explored traditional gender roles and how economic decline has reshaped these roles (Rodda, 1991; Cuddy, 2015). The method provided rich, real-life data, capturing everyday patterns of actions and meanings (Kennedy, 2014). Ultimately, qualitative research facilitated a first-hand understanding of how affected households navigate challenges, enhancing insights into human behaviour and experiences in the context of economic decline.

The study employed one-on-one in-depth interviews as a primary data collection method, aligning with its qualitative and descriptive nature. This approach facilitated direct interaction between the researcher and respondents, allowing participants to freely express their perceptions and experiences regarding the effects of the declining sugar industry on livelihoods and household gender roles (Rowley, 2012). Each interview lasted between 25 to 40 minutes, with women particularly elaborating on gender roles within households. The use of Kiswahili and Luhya languages ensured that respondents could communicate comfortably, enhancing the depth and clarity of responses. Overall, in-depth interviews provided rich, detailed insights into the socio-economic impacts of the sugar industry's decline.

The study utilised Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to supplement data from in-depth interviews, allowing for comparisons and deeper insights into the effects of the declining sugar industry on livelihoods and the region as a whole (Barbour, 2005). A total of four FGDs were conducted across Mumias, Nzoia, West Kenya, and Busia sugar belt zones, with 41 participants—23 men and 18 women. Group sizes varied, ensuring both homogeneity for comparison and diversity for richer discussions (Khan & Manderson, 1992; Barbour, 2005). Participants, selected based on knowledge and life experiences, ranged in age from 18 to 70 years and had educational backgrounds from Standard 2 to Form 4. Discussions explored livelihood impacts, shifting gender roles, norms, beliefs, and coping strategies at the household level. The relaxed group setting encouraged participants to share more openly, generating additional insights that had not surfaced during one-on-one interviews.

Key informant interviews focused on critical issues surrounding the establishment of the sugar industry in the region and the impact of its decline on livelihoods and the local economy. A total of eight key informants were selected based on their expertise and firsthand experience with the sugar industry's transformation. These included: a former transport officer from Mumias Sugar Company (MSC), a small-scale farmer/jaggery miller from the Mumias belt, a cane cutter from Nzoia Sugar Company (NSC), a large-scale farmer from Nzoia, two large-scale farmers from West Kenya, a former MSC agricultural extension officer from Busia, and a large-scale farmer from Busia. The purposeful selection of these informants ensured diverse perspectives, with small-scale farmers included to

Article DOI : https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.2.2986

provide insights that large-scale farmers might not offer. These interviews yielded confidential and detailed information on local events, industry trends, and economic conditions contributing to the decline of the sugar sector and its effects on livelihoods in Western Kenya.

Throughout the course of the study, observation was a constant and crucial source of data. In addition to vocal responses, the researcher aggressively documented nonverbal indicators from household heads and their wives during interviews, including body language, facial expressions, and gestures. Following a thematic analysis of these observational notes, recurrent themes pertaining to the impact of the dwindling sugar industry on livelihoods, gender roles, and coping mechanisms were found and grouped. By emphasising both the verbal and unsaid aspects of the participants' reality, this approach enhanced our comprehension of their lived experiences.

The use of open-ended questions enabled the researcher to explore key turning points related to livelihood challenges, shifting gender roles, and adaptive strategies adopted by households. According to Hayes (2000), open-ended questions allow participants the freedom to express their opinions, minimising researcher bias. Additionally, careful observation of implicit messages and body language enhanced the validity and depth of the findings, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of the study’s themes.

Data Interpretation and Analysis

Data analysis began immediately after qualitative data was collected, using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes within the responses. Thematic analysis, as defined by Alhojailan (2012), is a method of categorising data based on recurring themes, while Braun and Clarke (2006) describe it as a qualitative technique that identifies and reports emerging patterns. The process involved listening to interview recordings, transcribing them, and translating Kiswahili and Luhya responses into English, ensuring accuracy and retention of meaning. Slembrouck (2007) emphasises that transcription is a crucial step in research, allowing for close examination of data through repeated listening. The researcher conducted this process meticulously, ensuring familiarity with the data and enhancing reliability. Repeated reviews of audiotapes allowed for a deeper understanding of responses, identification of key themes, and recognition of shared ideas, all of which were analysed based on their relevance to the study’s objectives.

Validity, Reliability, and Reflexivity of the Study

Validity in research refers to the accuracy of a study in measuring what it intends to measure (Gravetter & Forzano, 2009). In this study, content validity was ensured by formulating relevant questions aligned with the study objectives, specifically addressing household experiences regarding gender role reconstruction, livelihood effects, and coping strategies in response to the declining sugar industry. In-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and participant observation were used for triangulation, enhancing the validity of findings by comparing multiple data sources. Expert translation of transcripts from Kiswahili to English further strengthened validity. Key informants provided insights into how economic decline has shaped community beliefs, values, and perceptions. Credibility was ensured by seeking feedback from participants on the emerging themes, ensuring that findings accurately reflected their experiences (Coolican, 2004; Creswell, 2009).

Reliability, which refers to the consistency of study results when repeated under similar conditions (Forrester, 2010), was maintained through a pilot test to assess the effectiveness of research instruments and refine them accordingly. Building rapport with participants in their native language (Luhya) facilitated honest responses and enhanced data reliability. The researcher applied bracketing (Miller & Crabtree, 1992; Moustakus, 1994; Boyd, 2001) to suspend personal biases about the sugar

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industry's decline, ensuring authentic responses. Reflexivity was also crucial, requiring self-awareness to prevent personal experiences from influencing findings (Hardy et al., 2001; Dowling, 2006). As a female researcher from the Mumias sugar belt, special care was taken to remain objective and not impose personal views. Data collection spanned two months (August–October 2019), beginning with official permissions from the National Council of Science and Technology (NCST) and introductory meetings with local authorities and participants. These steps fostered trust, enabling participants to share openly and ensuring the study's validity, reliability, and reflexivity.

RESULTS

Regional Economy and Socio-Economic Transformation

The qualitative information acquired from key informants, focus group discussions, and interviews highlights the crucial role that the sugar industry, in particular, Mumias Sugar Company, plays in the socioeconomic advancement of Western Kenya. Sugarcane farming was regularly cited by respondents as the main economic factor supporting homes, creating jobs, and promoting local business. Professionals with knowledge of the sector backed up these first-hand reports by outlining the extensive commercial networks connected to the facility, ranging from trade and transportation to farming. On-the-ground observations, including abandoned machinery and closed companies, provided concrete evidence of the area's economic downturn after the manufacturing failure.

The results of the study support previous studies by academics such as Wanyande (2001) and Lumet et al. (2022), who showed how the sugar business transformed rural communities into commercial centres, hence causing regional development. Such agro-processing industries also greatly increased rural labour markets and stimulated ancillary services, according to Lumet et al. (2022). This study, however, offers a modern and human perspective by demonstrating how the industry's demise has had a direct influence on social well-being, family stability, and income sources. Due to delayed sugar payments and missed business opportunities, women in particular have been compelled to search for alternate sources of income, frequently in the unorganised sector.

For regional development policy, these findings have significant ramifications. The demise of the sugar industry serves as a warning regarding rural development's over-reliance on one economic sector. Policymakers must encourage alternate value chains, repurpose existing infrastructure, and investigate diversification options in order to restore economic stability. For impacted households, social protection is particularly crucial. All things considered, the study emphasises the necessity of resilient, inclusive, and locally-informed economic planning in order to avert future collapses and guarantee sustained rural change.

Poverty and Livelihood Decline

These findings, based on in-depth interviews, focus groups, and key informant interviews, show how the loss of the sugar industry in Western Kenya, specifically in the vicinity of the Mumias and Nzoia sugar factories, has resulted in increasing poverty and socioeconomic degradation. While women emphasised growing risks for girls, such as early marriage and exploitation, household heads described a lack of resources, with men finding it difficult to pay for food and school fees. These experiences were supported by local officials and educators, who pointed out that rising rates of school dropouts and youth unemployment had led to a rise in crime and drug usage in communities like Mumias and Bungoma. These conclusions were validated by field observations, which showed failing public infrastructure, idle youth, and closed companies.

These results are consistent with more extensive research, including studies by Owuor (2014) and

Article DOI : https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.2.2986

Wamunga et al. (2016), which link social disintegration, food insecurity, and ingrained poverty to Kenya's rural agro-industries' demise. Similar to this, Saungweme and Odhiambo (2021) draw attention to the systemic dangers that come with rural economies' over-reliance on a single crop or employer. Although they were outliers, a small percentage of respondents who had diversified into retail, transportation, or education were able to mitigate the effects. Low cane prices, late payments, and restricted access to land for food crops keep communities in a state of chronic economic insecurity, even in places like Busia, where factories are still operating.

These discoveries have wide-ranging consequences. Policies that promote varied revenue sources and enhance food security are desperately needed, especially in areas that rely heavily on monoculture. Timely agricultural payments, fair land use regulations, and funding for easily available education are all examples of effective strategies. The vulnerabilities of women and young people, who suffer the most from economic collapse, must also be addressed by focused development initiatives. All things considered, the study deepens current conversations around rural resilience and emphasises the significance of moving away from reliance on single-industry models and toward more integrated and sustainable development strategies.

Crime and Insecurity

According to in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant stories, there has been a noticeable increase in crime and insecurity as a result of the collapse of sugar plants in the Mumias and Nzoia zones. The adoption of crime as a coping strategy for survival, family conflicts over limited resources, and rising theft instances were all mentioned by the respondents. Participants in a number of focus groups described how disputes within the household over money and food turned violent. Theft, especially in households, was often cited as a sign of financial distress as well as a tactic. These personal accounts highlight how poverty directly contributes to instability and lawlessness, underscoring the social costs of industrial collapse.

Important informants, including religious leaders and local leaders, noted that criminal gangs like the "42 Brothers" were becoming more established in neighbourhoods like Shibale and Ekero. These groups, which frequently recruit from the ranks of young people without jobs, are said to engage in violent robberies, sugarcane theft, and intimidation. These accounts were corroborated by observational evidence showing increased home security, pervasive dread, and evident stress on law enforcement agencies. These observations are consistent with earlier research by Mkutu (2009) and Wambugu (2019), who found comparable insecurity trends in rural areas with low economic status. Githinji and Holmquist (2009) also point out how organised crime easily fills the void left by the lack of economic alternatives.

Notably, regions near operating sugar factories, such as West Kenya and Busia, showed reduced levels of criminal activity, despite Mumias and Nzoia having high crime rates. The respondents ascribed this to the ongoing availability of chances for informal jobs, which serve to absorb young people who are idle. Violence was still occasionally reported, though, especially in relation to the distribution of sugar payments. The study's conclusions have important ramifications for practice and policy. Reversing the cycle of poverty-driven crime requires enhanced community policing, youth livelihood initiatives, and economic regeneration tactics. In the end, the disintegration of social order throughout Kenya's sugar belt is a reflection of more serious structural flaws, since economic failure has led to a protracted period of social disintegration and instability.

Stress, Depression, and Death

Respondents from the Mumias and Nzoia sugar zones described the serious effects of economic instability on their mental health, making the psychological and emotional toll of the sugar

Article DOI : https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.2.2986

industry's collapse a major issue in the study. Participants commonly mentioned mortality, depression, and stress as terrible consequences of long-term poverty. Due to unpaid sugarcane dues, some of which go back years, several farmers felt extreme mental discomfort. They were also taken aback when they saw negative balances on their factory statements. Desperation was exacerbated by the weight of outstanding obligations and unstable finances. Men were especially at risk; it has been stated that the psychological strain caused some of them to die or develop illnesses linked to stress. In severe circumstances, like in the River Nzoia, men tragically took their own lives as a result of financial ruin. These accounts were further substantiated by field observations, which revealed frequent funeral announcements and fresh graves, especially among middle-aged men.

The study's conclusions about mental health are consistent with other studies on how economic loss affects people psychologically. Prior research has shown that rural communities facing economic displacement have significant rates of depression and suicide, as evidenced by studies by Wamunga et al. (2016). According to the new study, stress and sadness replaced HIV/AIDS as the primary causes of mortality once the sugar sector collapsed, underscoring the tremendous emotional toll these communities bear. Women also had a significant mental health burden since they frequently took on the role of family caregiver when their husbands became ill or gave in to the psychological effects of financial difficulties. These findings underscore the psychological toll on both genders, with men particularly affected by the collapse of the sugar industry.

On the other hand, distinct trends of mental health distress were observed in the West Kenya and Busia sugar zones, where certain companies are still in operation. Although stress was still a problem, it was frequently associated with domestic disputes brought on by improper handling of sugarcane earnings, especially alcohol expenditures. In contrast to the Mumias and Nzoia zones, there were fewer documented incidents of depression-related mortality despite continuous stress. The results of the study demonstrate the critical need for psychosocial assistance and integrated mental health care in rural communities impacted by industrial decline. Furthermore, as unpaid or postponed dues contribute to both financial stress and potentially fatal mental health disorders, the significance of financial accountability in the sugar sector is emphasised. The research emphasises the need for a multi-sectoral approach, combining economic recovery, mental health services, and gender-sensitive livelihood strategies to address the deep-rooted challenges in these regions.

Unemployment

The collapse of the Mumias and Nzoia Sugar Factories had a significant impact on local youth employment, according to data from focus groups and in-depth interviews conducted in those locations. A large number of young men who had previously worked as casual industrial workers, loaders, or cane cutters lost their jobs. Young people frequently gathered in trading centres or boda-boda stages to vent their frustration over the lack of employment opportunities, which led to widespread idleness. Respondents pointed out that the region's economic uncertainty was made worse by the availability of temporary jobs, such as low-paying jobs on small farms, which were insufficient to sustain families. Key informants, such as local officials, connected the increase in unemployment to the rise in insecurity since jobless young people were more likely to commit crimes, including drug usage, theft, and gang activities.

On the other hand, some young men were able to obtain seasonal work in places like West Kenya and Busia, where some sugar plants are still in operation. These chances, though, were extremely competitive and frequently unsustainable. Additionally, a lack of education and skill development prevented many young people in these communities from accessing formal employment

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possibilities. According to the respondents, local youngsters are disadvantaged since sugar corporations frequently favour skilled personnel from other areas. These results are consistent with the study by Maket (2024), who found that young people in rural Kenya are disproportionately impacted by industrial decline, which restricts their access to steady employment and raises the possibility of social upheaval. Likewise, the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2021) emphasises that sub-Saharan Africa's rural employment is dominated by informal labour and seasonal jobs, leaving many youth underemployed or in precarious working conditions.

The results of the study highlight how urgently targeted interventions are needed to address the high rates of underemployment and youth unemployment in the area. Youth-focused employment initiatives, occupational training, and skill development are essential for assisting young people in obtaining steady and lasting employment. In these post-industrial areas, reviving the sugar industry or supporting alternative agro-enterprises may also offer substantial job prospects for young people and contribute to the restoration of community stability.

Collapse of Other Industries and Its Impact on Livelihoods

The collapse of large companies, such as Mumias Sugar Factory, Nzoia Sugar Factory, and Webuye Pan Paper Mills, had a significant impact on local livelihoods and poverty levels, according to findings from focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews conducted in Western Kenya. Participants described the devastation caused by the demise of these sectors, mostly blaming the collapse on private investor monopoly, political meddling, and government inaction. One major problem was the West Kenya Sugar Factory's hegemony, which was said to have weakened the entire regional sugar business by utilising legal tactics to discredit rivals. This circumstance was seen to be a major cause of the local economy's downturn.

Thousands of workers lost their jobs as a result of the loss of these industrial companies, which had far-reaching effects. Former workers who are currently engaged in low-wage casual work or small-scale vending have expressed serious difficulties in providing for necessities, including food, healthcare, and education. Particularly young people were displaced from steady industrial positions, which left many of them dependent on their families or earning unstable livelihoods in local marketplaces. These results are in line with studies by Were (2016), who pointed out that deindustrialization in rural Kenya has exacerbated economic marginalization and inequality, and Page (2016), who pointed out that the unchecked privatization of industries and the reduction in state support have resulted in job losses and a lack of opportunities for local community development.

In addition to causing instability in household incomes, the collapse of Western Kenya's industries also undermined the region's larger socioeconomic structure. Policy changes, such as measures for industrial revival, controls on monopolistic market practices, and focused investments in the growth of rural enterprises, are desperately needed to address these issues. Restoring economic stability and resilience to the impacted communities will require such actions.

Land Sub-Division and Land Segregation

In response to economic hardship made worse by the collapse of the sugar industry, land subdivision has become a common coping strategy in the Western Kenya sugar belt, according to data collected from focus group discussions (FGDs) and one-on-one interviews with household heads and their spouses. Land in the area was traditionally not split during a man's lifetime but rather passed down to sons upon the death of the father. But due to economic demands, early land subdivision has intensified. Men now sometimes work with their

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kids to sell land to cover immediate requirements like starting small businesses, buying motorbikes for boda-boda operations, or paying school fees.

Participants expressed remorse, particularly in relation to young people's misappropriation of land earnings. These funds are frequently wasted or spent carelessly on things like motorbikes, which can occasionally result in a high frequency of accidents. This illustrates the conflict between the economic survival demands that families currently face and traditional land tenure patterns, which are firmly anchored in cultural values.

Although the rights of women to own land are becoming more widely acknowledged, daughters are still mainly left out of inheritance. This result is consistent with Makutsa (2010), who pointed out that despite constitutional provisions, cultural norms in many Kenyan communities continue to limit women's access to land. In order to promote independent farming or to satisfy loan collateral requirements, some male respondents stated that they had given their wives land. Competition between households over land use and its economic output has occasionally resulted from this.

Plot sizes are also getting smaller, which reduces the amount of land that can be used for sugarcane production and has a direct impact on household income. Sugarcane is the main source of income for many communities, and the sustainability of this livelihood is weakened by land fragmentation. These results are consistent with those of Wanjala et al. (2021), who contend that Kenyan land fragmentation seriously jeopardises long-term rural sustainability and commercial agriculture.

These findings have important ramifications. The change in land ownership and inheritance customs reflects broader socioeconomic shifts brought on by poverty and the collapse of industry. The ongoing subdivision and sale of property may jeopardize household food security and jeopardise the region's long-term agricultural sustainability in the absence of thorough land use planning and changes to inheritance rules that guarantee fair access, particularly for daughters. In order to protect rural livelihoods in the future, these developments require immediate policy attention.

Food Shortage and Food Security

The results of focus group discussions (FGDs) and one-on-one interviews conducted in the four sugar belt zones—Mumias, Nzoia, West Kenya, and Busia—showed that food shortages were a common worry. The main causes of family food insecurity, according to participants, are the region's long-standing reliance on sugarcane agriculture and the demise of Mumias Sugar Company. Many respondents mentioned that they now find it difficult to pay for enough food, frequently only eating two meals a day, mostly omena and ugali. Although sweet potatoes and cassava are occasionally utilised as alternatives in the Nzoia and West Kenya zones, they are still insufficient to guarantee steady nourishment.

In an effort to restore food balance, some farmers have switched from growing sugarcane to growing maize, but they still face many obstacles. The most commonly mentioned problem is that intermediaries take advantage of farmers by buying their maize at low prices and then selling it at inflated prices when there is a shortage. This exploitation is consistent with previous research by Jayne et al. (2006), who found that smallholder farmers in Kenya face barriers to food access due to weak market systems and the dominance of intermediaries.

Concerns were also raised by participants regarding the scarcity of land for subsistence farming, which results from years of sugarcane being prioritised as a cash crop. A rising danger to regional food security was identified as the spread of sugarcane plantations into areas like Trans Nzoia and Nandi that have historically produced maize. Similar issues were brought up in the study of Muthoni et al. (2017), who cautioned that if integrated land use plans are not implemented to effectively address the

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encroachment of sugarcane into regions that are normally used for the production of staple crops, food shortages may worsen.

These findings have important ramifications. They highlight the precarious equilibrium between household food security and cash crop output. The area runs the danger of becoming more susceptible to long-term food insecurity if land becomes more limited and monocropping continues. To prevent smallholder farmers from being exploited, policy interventions that support integrated farming systems, enhance market accessibility, and control intermediaries are desperately needed. The region's reliance on cash crops like sugarcane may be lessened and food supplies stabilised throughout the year with the support of improved food storage facilities, strengthened agricultural extension services, and alternative livelihoods.

Cane-Cutters' Movements and Migration Patterns

After the Mumias and Nzoia Sugar Factories collapsed, there was a notable change in the means of subsistence for cane cutters in Western Kenya, according to information obtained from focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews, and oral histories. Many cane cutters, who were once vital workers in the sugarcane business, have been compelled to travel in search of work to sugar plants that are currently operating, such as West Kenya, Kibos, Butali, and Ramisi, or even over the border to Kakira in Uganda. Others have looked for work in cities like Eldoret, Nakuru, and Nairobi, frequently accepting part-time jobs in the unorganised sector or in construction.

While some migrants do send money home, participants noticed that these transfers are frequently erratic and insufficient, trapping their families in a vicious cycle of financial difficulties. Many respondents bemoaned the fact that cane cutters seldom come home, which causes marital stress, family disintegration, and, in certain situations, heightened susceptibility to HIV and other STDs, particularly for divorced or single partners.

These results are consistent with other studies by Adepoju (2008) and Oucho (2002), which emphasised economic migration in East Africa as a coping strategy and a factor that undermines family unity. Gender-based vulnerabilities, weaker community relationships, and a fall in rural economies as a result of the loss of local labour and consumers are all common outcomes of migration brought on by the collapse of rural economies.

These findings have significant ramifications. The economic downturn in sugar-growing regions has been made worse by the exodus of cane cutters, who have been deprived of both labour and purchasing power. New social problems have also emerged as a result of it, such as broken families, unsafe sexual practices, and psychological suffering brought on by extended separations. These patterns highlight how urgently localised job plans, returnee reintegration initiatives, and family support services are needed to lessen the socioeconomic effects of the rural labour movement. In addition to improving livelihoods and lowering health risks related to economic mobility, these interventions may aid in reestablishing community cohesion.

Changing Patterns in Micro-Enterprise

The economic activities of local households have changed significantly as a result of the fall of the sugar industry in Western Kenya, especially in the Mumias and Nzoia sugar belt zones. Women are increasingly using small and medium-sized businesses to augment family incomes, according to data from focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews. Women have historically assisted with sugarcane weeding, frequently through barter trade, but this position changed when the sugar industry declined. Women started obtaining cash weeding contracts from businesses such as Mumias Sugar or individual farmers, and many of them went on to sell vegetables, fish, and other products, often

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working on commission or travelling great distances for trade.

Together with these changes in entrepreneurship, microfinance organisations and savings plans have become crucial because they allow women to hire young men and own boda-bodas (motorbikes), thereby increasing the variety of their sources of income. These adjustments have been essential to maintaining household economies, especially in households where men have had difficulty finding steady work. The findings of Goetz et al. (2009), which indicate that economic crises frequently result in increased female participation in economic activities, particularly in failing industries, are consistent with this shift in economic roles, where women increasingly provide financial support for the household.

Men now face psychological difficulties as a result of the reversal of established gender norms brought forth by this phenomenon. Many men who used to be the main breadwinners are distressed by the shifting dynamics of their families and their inability to make financial contributions. This change in the power dynamics inside households emphasises the necessity of gender-sensitive economic policies that promote women's empowerment and take into account men's mental health. Community-based support networks are also essential for reducing the growing burden on women and advocating for gender-neutral strategies for economic recovery, which may promote social cohesiveness and long-term financial success for every member of the household.

Naming and Re-Naming of Places and Business Premises

Significant changes in the economic and social landscape have resulted from the collapse of the sugar industry in the Mumias and Nzoia sugar belt zones. Renaming locations and commercial buildings in the area represents the community's effort to distance itself from the dwindling sugar industry, according to the results of focus group discussions (FGDs) and observations. Sites like "Stage Maringo" were changed to "Stage Mawazo," indicating the unpredictability and financial difficulties of the time. In a similar vein, companies that were previously linked to the sugar industry, such as "Sugarland" and "Farmers Choice," have changed their names to "Valu Valu," signifying a departure from the once-prestigious sugar-based economy.

As local companies and transportation services adapt to the decreased economic activity brought on by manufacturing closures, these renaming adjustments are an expression of larger economic difficulties. According to the report, men have occasionally taken on family responsibilities as a result of changing gender dynamics, while many locals, especially women, have resorted to small-scale enterprises like retail commerce to augment their income. Significant poverty, unemployment, and food insecurity have resulted from the closing of the sugar factories, forcing families to turn to new means of subsistence like microbusiness or migration in search of jobs.

The ramifications of these modifications underscore the close relationship between economic stability and communal identity. Renaming places and companies is a coping strategy that reflects the region's attempts to reinvent itself following the demise of the sugar industry. These changes also point to the possibility of an economic recovery through entrepreneurship and diversification into small enterprises, offering the community a chance to regain its resilience and adjust to the new economic conditions.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

According to this report, the socioeconomic fabric of Western Kenya has been severely affected by the loss of the sugar sector. Families that formerly depended on factory work and sugarcane cultivation are now facing declining living standards, food insecurity, and poverty. Widespread sugar factory

Article DOI : https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.2.2986

closures or poor performance have had repercussions, such as high rates of youth unemployment and school dropouts, a rise in land conflicts brought on by subdivisions and sales, and an increase in criminal activity by desperate youngsters.

In addition, women have been forced to use different coping mechanisms, such as starting small enterprises or applying for microloans to help support their family, especially when it comes to paying for school. Many people have found it practically impossible to get healthcare treatments due to a lack of finances, which has worsened mental health issues and reduced their quality of life. These results offer strong proof that the decline of the sugar business is directly related to the region's economic fragility.

Recommendation

The study's conclusions suggest a number of focused measures to alleviate the socioeconomic difficulties that Western Kenyan communities face. First and foremost, the Kenyan government ought to give the reform and execution of its policies pertaining to livelihood and rural poverty reduction top priority. With an emphasis on long-term solutions for reducing poverty and creating jobs in the wake of the sugar industry's demise, these policies ought to be created to directly address the region's particular economic difficulties.

Second, in order to diversify sources of income beyond sugarcane growing, there is an urgent need for more funding and focused initiatives. Agribusiness, vocational training, and small business development should be encouraged since they can offer different revenue streams and lessen reliance on a single sector. Building sustainability and economic resilience in these communities requires this kind of variety.

Furthermore, it is crucial to invest in the development of human capital, especially through community-based initiatives for entrepreneurship and life skills training. These initiatives will give women and young people useful, employable skills that will promote independence and open up new economic prospects. Lastly, enhancing financial inclusion and assisting grassroots projects that generate sustainable revenue depend on fortifying alliances with microfinance organisations. These collaborations have the potential to empower local business owners and promote community-driven economic growth by expanding access to credit and financial services.

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