Article

Engaged Scholarship through Community Social Labs: Advancing Indigenisation of Social Work Education in Uganda

by

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Abstract

The indigenisation of social work education in Africa is a response to the limitations of Western-centric approaches to addressing complex local social issues. This paper explores the role of engaged scholarship and community social labs in indigenising social work education in Uganda. The study analyses data from four focus group discussions, and student WhatsApp conversations, to examine how these approaches facilitate meaningful community engagement and the integration of local knowledge into the social work curriculum. The results show that community social labs can help with cultural sensitivity and problem-solving that is relevant to the situation. They also demonstrate that institutional constraints and power dynamics may hinder this transition.

Despite these issues, the study suggests that engaged scholarship through community social labs has significant potential to make social work education and practice in Uganda more culturally sensitive and responsive to local realities. Even with these challenges, the study suggests that engaging scholars in community social labs has a lot of potential to make social work education and practice in Uganda more sensitive to local cultures and needs.

Keywords: engaged scholarship, social labs, community social labs, indigenisation, social work education, Uganda, field work practicum

Introduction

The social work profession integrates practical application and scholarly inquiry to promote social transformation, advocate for social justice and empower individuals and communities (Spitzer, 2014; Wamara et al., 2023). Originating in the Global North, social work education and practice have been significantly shaped by Western theories, methodologies and experiences, often reflecting colonial histories (Spitzer, 2014). The British colonial administration introduced the social work profession in Uganda during the 1950s to address issues related to urbanisation (Wamara, 2017). The Nsamizi Training Institute for Social Development was founded in 1952, and the Department of Social Work and Social Administration at Makerere University was established in 1963 to offer therapeutic, community development and structural social work (Wamara & Carvalho, 2021). Social work education systems exhibit a clear influence, with Western theories predominating and inadequately adapting to local cultural contexts (Spitzer, 2014). In East Africa, 62.5% of social work instructors primarily utilise Western-generated literature (Nilsen et al., 2023; Author et al., 2014), despite the distinct socio-cultural and contextual differences between Africa and the Western world. Additionally, a limited number of social service workers possess formal qualifications due to existing licensing mechanisms (Wamara & Carvalho, 2021).

Studies show that Western models do not do very well in explaining important social issues in African countries, like community relationships, traditional healing practices and spirituality. This makes interventions less effective (Luwangula et al., 2019), and shows how important it is to make social work more in line with local needs (Gray, 2010). For social work to stay useful and relevant, it needs to consider local situations, and use culturally appropriate strategies that fit the specific needs of the communities it works with (Mupedziswa et al., 2019). Despite its colonial origins, social work continues to play a critical role in addressing socioeconomic challenges in Africa (Mupedziswa et al., 2019).

The misalignment between dominant Western social work practices and the context of the Global South has driven researchers to explore indigenous approaches to social work (Schmid & Turton, 2022). Western social work concepts may not fully

align with non-Western cultures and philosophies (Midgley, 1990), prompting calls for locally informed practices to address local realities (Ugiagbe, 2015). Over the past four decades, researchers in the Global South have advanced efforts to promote indigenised social work approaches tailored to local contexts and challenges (Gray & Coates, 2010; Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011). This shift has influenced both social work practice and education.

This paper draws on the experiences of Makerere University social work students working in social labs within rural Ugandan communities. Through knowledge sharing, theory-to-practice approaches and community-based learning, students engaged directly with community members in collaborative activities, promoting university-community partnerships (Boyer, 1996; Delavega et al., 2017). Community social labs gave students hands-on chances to work together to find locally led solutions to social problems. These labs embodied indigenisation by incorporating local knowledge, cultural values and traditional practices into social work education (Gray, 2010; Midgley, 1990). This study specifically addresses the following research questions: **What are the benefits and challenges of social labs for social work students?** And **how can social labs as a form of engaged scholarship (ES) exemplify indigenisation of social work education in Uganda?**

Contextualising Indigenisation from a Social Work Perspective

Indigenisation, introduced by the United Nations in 1971, emphasises the adaptation of social work education and professional standards to address the diverse needs of various nations (Gray & Coates, 2016; Midgley, 1990). Wamara et al. (2023) say that this process involves combining different areas of practice, cultural differences and ideas from different settings, while staying in line with the current political and sociocultural situation (Wamara et al., 2023). Indigenisation contests the perception of social work as exclusively a modern Western construct, which marginalises Indigenous perspectives (Gray & Coates, 2010). Indigenous social work seeks to develop social work methodologies that are culturally and socially pertinent to the issues encountered by African Indigenous populations (Gray & Coates, 2010; Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011). This method decolonises social work education by embedding local realities, cultures, beliefs and social dynamics into practice

(Ibrahima & Mattaini, 2019). It adapts imported concepts to address local needs, amplifies marginalised voices and incorporates indigenous knowledge into practice (Gray & Coates, 2010). Indigenous social work takes into account the traditions and ways of life before colonisation, and offers a flexible framework for localised practice (Breidlid & Krøvel, 2020). Social work appropriation involves integrating traditional, Indigenous and local interventions into mainstream practices (Spitzer & Author, 2019).

It also enhances social work discourse by providing perspectives that extend beyond traditional, radical and postmodern frameworks (Gray, 2005).

Researchers from the Global South emphasise the necessity of tailoring social work education and practice to align with local traditions, customs and requirements (Osei-Hwedie & Boateng, 2018; Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011; Spitzer, 2014; Author, 2014; Author et al., 2014). Relatedly, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work advocate for the incorporation of indigenous perspectives and knowledge:

> Part of the legacy of colonialism is that Western theories and knowledge have been exclusively valorised, and indigenous knowledge has been devalued, discounted, and hegemonised by Western theories and knowledge. The proposed definition attempts to halt and reverse that process by acknowledging that Indigenous societies carry their own values, ways of knowing, and ways of transmitting their knowledge, and have made invaluable contributions to science. Social work seeks to redress historic Western scientific colonialism and hegemony by listening to- and learning from Indigenous peoples around the world. In this way, social work knowledge will be co-created and informed by Indigenous peoples …… IFSW 2020.

Indigenised social work emphasises reciprocity, altruism and social cohesion, thereby enhancing access to services for local communities. This way of thinking focuses on freedom, unity, helping each other, working together and sharing. It lets communities deal with problems like poverty and sudden problems by forming self-help and sharing groups (Luwangula et al., 2019). These practices are based on the principles of wholeness and communalism and a dedication to improving human existence (Gray et al., 2008). Indigenised social work has made notable progress in Canada, with leading institutions including First Nations University of Canada, the University of Regina, Wilfrid Laurier University, the University of Manitoba and Memorial University's School of Social Work (Andersen, 2022), yet staffing, administration, curriculum development and resource allocation remain areas of ongoing challenge

(Andersen, 2022). In African contexts, social work education often lacks input from national or African authors and publications that offer locally relevant empirical content (Nilsen et al., 2023). This gap underscores ongoing debates and controversies surrounding the indigenisation of social work in Africa (Author, 2014). Uganda is progressing in this area, exemplified by initiatives at Makerere University that facilitate the incorporation of local knowledge into social work education and practice through engaged scholarship (Author, 2014).

The globalisation of social work education and practice necessitates a reduction in reliance on Western models, and an increased incorporation of culturally diverse methods (Osei-Hwedie & Boateng, 2018; Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011; Spitzer, 2014; Author, 2014; Author et al., 2014). Bridging the gap between Western social work paradigms, and the unique social challenges faced by African communities, is essential (Osei-Hwedie & Boateng, 2018; Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011; Spitzer, 2014; Author, 2014; Author et al., 2014). African social work requires indigenisation, indicating that training and practice must align with the cultural and moral contexts of the African environment (Gray et al., 2014). This paper explores the indigenisation of social work education in Uganda, drawing on insights from the experiences of community social lab students at Makerere University.

Engaged Scholarship and Community Social Labs for Social Work Innovation

Engaged Scholarship (ES) is a unique method that brings together academic and civic cultures by connecting academic knowledge with real-world uses to solve social problems (Boyer 1996, p. 33; Small & Uttal, 2005). This process engages scholars, practitioners and communities in collaborative initiatives aimed at co-creating indigenous knowledge and formulating locally grounded solutions (Small & Uttal, 2005). Certain countries interpret ES contextually, emphasising citizenship, while others prioritise economic development and funding (Goddard et al., 2016). ES addresses the gap between academic research and community-driven knowledge aimed at solving real-world problems (Barge & Shockley-Zalabak, 2008). Its varying definitions have introduced overlapping terms such as ‘civic engagement,’ ‘public engagement,’ ‘community outreach’ and ‘community–university partnerships’ (Hart &

Northmore, 2011; Sandmann, 2008; Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Ovretveit et al., 2014; Tseng et al., 2017), along with ‘practitioner–scientist partnerships’ (Spoth & Greenberg, 2005) and ‘sustainability science’ (Cash et al., 2003), thus reflecting its multidisciplinary applications (Koekkoek, Van Ham, & Kleinhans, 2021). ES has become increasingly significant as higher education institutions re-evaluate their roles in public service (Boyer, 1996) to bridge the gap between academic research and community-driven knowledge, highlighting the needs identified by marginalised communities (Boyer, 1996; Delavega et al., 2017; Schensul, 2010). Social workers use ES in people-centred ways like evaluation research, participatory action research, evidence-based practice and translational research, which shows how it can be changed to fit different situations (Delavega et al., 2017). Makerere University is integrating indigenous knowledge systems into social work education in Africa and Uganda, redesigned to promote holistic development, child adversity and emotional and physical well-being through engaged scholarship in community social labs.

Hassan (2014) describes social labs (SL) as places where researchers try out possible solutions to real-life problems in society, with the help of experts and stakeholders who work together to design actions that solve problems. They are not guided by predetermined project plans, but rather aim at proactive experimentation, testing and trying out possible strategies, approaches and solutions at the micro level in order to draw lessons for the systemic level of the addressed societal challenge (Hassan, 2014). Notably, these experiments differ from natural science experiments conducted in a closed laboratory because they are social experiments developed and tested for potential solutions in the social context where the challenges arise (Marschalek et al., 2022; Timmermans et al., 2020). Social labs are a participatory action research method that brings together theory and practice, offers a flexible way based on the theory of experiential learning and allows for a regular cycle of exchange between abstract ideas and real-life experiences (Timmermans et al., 2020). Social labs are therefore designed to promote collaborative work and direct engagement with local communities in the design and implementation of interventions (Chitere, 2018). They have been quietly brewing for almost 20 years, and thousands have participated in them, focusing on eliminating poverty, promoting water sustainability, transforming media, climate change and social innovations (Hassan, 2014).

The social lab approach combines theory and practice, allowing students to engage with societal issues, collaborate with experts and co-create and test potential solutions. It promotes the experiential learning model through integrating abstract concepts with real-world applications, while combining social lab frameworks with action research to establish a theoretical basis for applying scientific methods in research contexts (Timmermans et al., 2020, Hassan, 2014). These labs create an interconnected 'ecology of labs' that engage diverse stakeholders in experimentation, co-creation and iterative learning, prioritising collaboration to create transformative solutions for meaningful social change (Hassan, 2014; Timmermans et al., 2020; Westley et al., 2009). This initiative of scholars engaging with communities through the social labs fits in well with the concept of engaged scholarship, which fosters community empowerment and participation, while aligning harmoniously with the core objectives of indigenised social work education: promoting the integration of local knowledge, cultural values and indigenous practices into the social work curriculum.

In Uganda, this approach is being applied through the RESILINET project. This is a six-year project (2021–2026) focused on enhancing research and capacity building in social work across Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda.[1] It aims to generate locally relevant knowledge tailored to the needs and challenges of local communities. Through the project, social work students are engaged in a community social lab in two rural communities, where they actively collaborate with communities to identify and address complex social and environmental challenges through dialogue and exploration.

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks that support the community Social Lab methodology

Experimental learning theory emphasises the importance of practical learning. Social work students engaged in the community social labs project engage in field practicum activities, addressing challenges in community settings through collaboration with

[1] The project is a collaboration between the University of Rwanda's Department of Social Work, Makerere University's Department of Social Work and Social Administration in Uganda, the Institute of Social Work in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and the University of Agder's Department of Sociology and Social Work in Norway. It is supported by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) and the Norwegian Programme for Capacity Development in Higher Education and Research (NORHED).

various stakeholders (Intire & Mae, 2019; Kolb, 1984). This theory, acknowledged in social work literature, emphasises the significance of knowledge acquired through field practicums (Byrd & Bivens, 2011; Intire & Mae, 2019), and posits that student involvement in community social lab projects is anticipated to yield substantial benefits as they engage with real-world social issues, and observe professional interactions through formative integration (Kolb, 1984; Intire & Mae, 2019). Experiential learning improves educational outcomes, and equips social workers for their future professions (Cheung & Delavega, 2014, p. 1074).

Experiential learning was evident when students in the RESILIENT Project worked alongside professionals in communities of practice, engaging in discussions and sharing experiences. This informal setting was common in community social labs in Uganda, where social workers exchange insights. Wenger formalised the concept of communities of practice in 1998, emphasising the importance of fieldwork participation (Wenger, 1998). In his first book on the topic, he expressed that:

> We are constantly engaged in the pursuit of enterprises of all kinds… As we define these enterprises and engage in their pursuit together, we interact with each other and with the world, and we tune our relations with each other and with the world accordingly. In other words, we learn. Over time, this collective learning results in practices… It makes sense, therefore, to call these kinds of communities, communities of practice (p. 45) (Wenger, 1998).

Communities of practice are groups of people who share common goals and activities that develop over time to establish acceptable norms. Such communities have been applied in various sectors, such as healthcare, school counselling, computer science and painting instruction (Pyrko et al., 2017; Wenger et al., 2002; Woodside & Paulus, 2009). Educators thus encourage students to participate in these communities to uphold interactions between people and the world, rather than learning abstract models (Staempfli et al., 2016). Learning in communities of practice proves more advantageous than classroom learning, because they allow students to observe others' interpretations and behaviours, and incorporate their findings into new practice techniques (Klein & Connell, 2008; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002), which was embodied in the RESILIENT Project.

The Ugandan community social lab project utilised a participatory approach that facilitated active student engagement in empirical data collection and interventions in

rural communities, emphasising experiential learning. Social labs foster an appreciation for cultural nuances, enabling scholars to address community complexities, thereby improving the relevance and effectiveness of social work interventions (Hassan, 2014).

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Setting

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative design to examine the experiences and perspectives of students placed in community social labs to advance the indigenisation of social work education. Qualitative methodology provided a nuanced understanding of the complexities of engaging scholars in specific social contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2012; Creswell et al., 2007; Queirós et al., 2017). Exploratory research is designed to gain an initial understanding of a problem, with focus groups well-suited for this purpose due to their interactive and dynamic nature (Creswell & Poth, 2012).

During the community social lab placements, various stakeholders engaged with the students, but this paper specifically focuses on the students' perspectives. By focusing on the experiences of social work students, this study assesses how ES contributes to the indigenisation process. Although student experiences are not the sole measure of the indigenisation process's suitability for community-specific challenges, they provide a fresh perspective on how social labs can further the indigenisation debate.

The two study districts in Uganda, Gulu and Luuka, face significant challenges affecting child well-being. Gulu, in northern Uganda, is a post-conflict region struggling with high poverty, violence, school dropouts and street children. Statistics from Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS 2016) show that approximately 80% of households live below the poverty line, 43% of children experience stunted growth and school enrolment rates are low compared to national averages at 69%, with many children dropping out due to economic pressures and conflicts. The illiteracy rate is also concerning, with only 60% of the population aged 10 years and above being literate. Approximately 58% of children in Gulu experience some form of

violence, including physical and emotional abuse, often linked to poverty and the aftermath of conflict (UNICEF 2018).

High rates of school dropouts, child labour, teenage pregnancies, child marriages, rising domestic violence and widespread poverty characterise the Luuka District in eastern Uganda. Poverty in Luuka has become a defining feature of rural Uganda, with statistics from UBOS revealing that 74% of the population never studied beyond primary school, only 3.8% pursued education beyond the secondary school, 36% do not own land, 47% of children are stunted and 62% live below the poverty line (UBOS, 2016).

During their placements in the social labs, students worked as partners with communities, incorporating cultural values through experiential learning (Kolb et al., 2014). Students engaged directly with the communities to diagnose problems and propose workable solutions using locally available resources. These social labs allowed students to immerse themselves in the community, applying classroom theories to real-life situations.

Purposive convenience sampling was used to select students who had enroled in- and completed their fieldwork practicum in the social labs established under the RESILIENT Project in Uganda. We purposefully selected 26 social work students from Makerere University, comprising 20 females and six males. Of these, 12 were undergraduates and 14 graduate students. Their age ranged from 22 to 35 years. Eight students were from the first cohort of 2022, while 18 were from the 2023 cohort. Of these students, 16 were placed in the Gulu District and 10 in the Luuka district. How did we ensure voluntary participation in the study?

Primary data was collected through four focus group discussions with students. Focus group discussions (FGDs) are ideal for exploring participants' shared experiences, perceptions and insights in a collective setting, hence allowing for a rich, nuanced data that may not emerge through individual interviews. In the context of this study, FGDs provided an opportunity for social work students to reflect collaboratively on their experiences in social labs, fostering a dynamic exchange of ideas and perspectives (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The first author moderated all the

focus group discussions, with˙ each session lasting between 1.5-2 hours. An open-ended discussion guide was used, with the moderator remaining flexible, probing for deeper insights and exploring unexpected ideas. The use of an open-ended discussion guide allowed students to reflect on their experiences and explore the nuances of their time in the social labs. The discussions focused on topics such as students' understanding of ES and social labs, positive outcomes and success stories, challenges in applying the model and opportunities for improving the approach.

Secondary data was obtained from student interactions on a WhatsApp group created for sharing experiences during their social lab placements. The WhatsApp group, consisting of 31 members, served as a platform and safe environment for students to share their experiences during their practicum in the social labs. Informed consent was obtained from the students to use the data shared on the platform. This paper analyses these unique student experiences with the WhatsApp group.

We recorded all focus group discussions on audio, transcribed them verbatim and imported the data into Atlas, version 8, for further management. We conducted a thematic data analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Gibson & Brown, 2009). To ensure trustworthiness, we repeatedly listened to the interview clips and reviewed the focus group transcripts and WhatsApp chats, coding sections based on emerging themes and study objectives (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Gibson & Brown, 2009). The iterative process of code development aligned with patterns and themes, thereby ensuring a systematic exploration of the students' social lab experiences, challenges and opportunities (Gibson & Brown, 2009). Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps, we familiarised ourselves with the data, generated initial codes, identified and reviewed themes and produced the paper. Key emergent themes included students designing local solutions, engaging in an innovative creative space, translating theory into practice, community interaction through partnerships, creating an empowered student-community relationship, resilience, adaptability and peer-to-peer learning. This framework provided a detailed approach to keyword selection, coding, theme development and conceptual interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethical approval for the study was given by the Makerere University School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee, with administrative clearance provided by the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology. The study also used data from social media, specifically the social lab students WhatsApp group, and while this may raise some ethical concerns pertaining to confidentiality and informed consent, this was addressed by obtaining written consent from all the students to use the data from the social media and the focus group discussion.

Findings

The key themes emerging from the study highlight the untapped potential of engaging scholars in hands-on learning through the community social labs. The community social labs provide students with the opportunity to design local solutions and engage innovatively in creative spaces, with the aim of addressing child adversities in rural settings. These labs therefore offer a practical, hands-on environment for translating theory into practice. Significant findings emphasise how community social labs promote community engagement and interaction through partnerships and collaborations, foster an empowered student-community relationship that values knowledge sharing, building students' resilience and adaptability, and promoting peer-to-peer learning. These findings demonstrate the ability of students to collaborate with various stakeholders, defining the community social lab as a professional experiment that offers a creative space for students to practically apply theoretical knowledge. The findings are presented following the two main themes emergent: (1) the significance of the community social labs, and (2) the constraints and challenges of the community social labs.

Community Social Labs are not conventional - promoting partnerships, building resilience and adaptability

The students reported that community social labs provide more practical, hands-on experiences compared to traditional fieldwork placements. Community social labs offer an actively engaging environment where students identified, planned and executed activities tailored to address specific societal needs, enabling them to fully immerse in the community. This intensive community interaction distinguishes social labs from conventional field practicum, where students often have a limited direct

engagement with the community. In the social labs, students reported a deeper sense of engagement and understanding, in contrast to the more passive experience of traditional internships:

> As an undergraduate, I completed three field placements, but I think social work is now moving away from the traditional placement model towards a more participatory approach. For instance, social labs are enhancing our learning by allowing us to put classroom theories, such as the social-ecological perspective on how the environment affects individuals, into direct practice. When I visit a community, I can now analyse why a child dropped out of school, rather than just memorising the concepts in class. This hands-on training is making our learning more impactful and engaging. (FGD)

Students highlighted a participatory development of demand-driven, sustainable solutions using community resources, making social labs more interactive, engaging and empowering. According to the students, indigenisation takes the forms of community-student partnerships, collective problem solving and adopting community definitions of problems.

The social labs fostered strong ties between the university and local communities by bridging gaps in understanding, and promoting stakeholder cooperation. Students described the labs to be empowering for encouraging self-reliance, and creating an enabling environment for indigenous people to help address their challenges locally without over-reliance on external aid. For example, students supporting school reintegration for children who had dropped out:

> There is a family where a girl got pregnant during COVID, and the father refused to take her back to school. But through an engagement in the social lab, the father accepted to pay for her fees and reintegrate her into school (students' FGD)

Students also collaborated with communities on grassroots initiatives like the establishment of training programmes on making liquid soap and reusable pads to address menstrual hygiene. These communally driven projects continue to thrive, hence highlighting their sustainability. Other notable initiatives were the school fee savings group for parents and peer-to-peer motivational clubs to improve school attendance, literacy and student skills.

Additionally, the community social labs fostered a greater resilience and flexibility in students through creative and innovative approaches meant for diverse cultural contexts. Through hands-on engagement, students gained insights from communities, and collaborated to identify and address local challenges. Despite the

difficulties encountered, the immersive social lab experience accelerated skill development and bolstered student confidence, as demonstrated by their contributions to resolving social issues affecting children. Students reported changes in their attitudes, knowledge and even behaviours.

One student shared that, *'I used to think that community members had little to offer in social work...but now I have learned to appreciate to indigenous knowledge*.'

Through collaborative stakeholder support the community social lab demonstrated the effectiveness of engaging scholars in collaborative practice. Students received assistance from a range of stakeholders, including the community, local leaders, the university and peers. This multifaceted support contributed to the comprehensiveness of their field experiences, illuminating the power of engaged scholarship in promoting diverse stakeholder engagement.

Local leaders provided supervisory, logistical and administrative assistance in the field, while students reported receiving pre-placement training to prepare for their roles and understanding their responsibilities and facilitating problem-solving. The university provided language support by pairing fluent students in local languages with those who lacked proficiency. The university also offered ongoing financial and technical support, providing the resources needed for successful fieldwork.

Peer support was evident through the close proximity and the WhatsApp group, enabling collaboration and problem solving. One student remarked, *'We were using the WhatsApp group but then we would also call K (name of a student). If K does not pick at that time, you call B (name of other student) from Buchoro…so it was kind of team work'* (FGD).

Students also tapped into other traditional community structures, engaging with elders and organising dialogues to incorporate community participation in needs assessment, asset mapping and initiative design.

They reported that, *'Other stakeholders participated in dialogues; we had some of them who volunteered to be members of the child Protection Committees formed'* (FGD).

These findings indicate that the success of community social labs depend on diverse stakeholders' involvement, partnerships and an understanding of the key principles of ES, promoting a balanced contribution from both traditional and elite stakeholders.

Constraints and Challenges of Community Social Labs

While community social labs offer valuable opportunities for experiential learning and community engagement, their implementation is not without its challenges. These constraints arise from structural, logistical and contextual factors that can impact the effectiveness of the labs. Understanding these challenges is crucial to addressing barriers, and enhancing the overall success of social labs in social work education. Key among the challenges is an inadequate amount of time assigned to the labs, the language barrier and high stakeholder expectations.

The students felt that the allocated time for implementing the community social labs was insufficient. Placement durations varied depending on the students' level of study: second-year students had four weeks, third-year students eight weeks, and master's students 10 weeks. According to the students, this timeframe was too short to create meaningful change, address social issues effectively or establish sustainable initiatives. The preparation period, including training and orientation before the placements, was also deemed inadequate. And several stakeholder groups failed to meet their expectations regarding support:

> I think the social labs need more time to be properly implemented. The 10-week duration was not enough for us to achieve the set goals. We often faced disappointments from community leaders, who would fail to mobilise the communities as agreed, forcing us to do it ourselves. I believe the social labs should be extended to allow for more meaningful engagement and impact. (FGD, Luuka and Gulu)

Another key issue that came up strongly is the language barrier. Some of the students cited limited proficiency with the local languages spoken in the communities, which presented meaningful barriers for engagement. Language is a critical tool for the students, allowing them to fully engage with, understand and respond to the

needs of their communities. Students mentioned that the ability to communicate in the local language was a key resource in the social labs.

Successful harmonisation and the management of expectations among diverse stakeholders are crucial for the success and sustainability of social labs. The communities where the social labs were implemented had high expectations that could not always be met. According to the students, these communities had limited experience with externally-driven community mobilisation initiatives that rely solely on local resources. Community participation in the social labs was not compensated, which differed from the norm in Uganda, where community initiatives often provide compensation for transport and meals. This lack of compensation sometimes affected community commitment and reduced attendance at dialogues:

> There was too much expectation, especially from the leaders: they expected to get money because they were helping in mobilising for a meeting. They expected us to give them something. I remember the first meeting all of them came, but the second meeting, none of them came. We had to use our skills to mobilise the community, and do what we had planned to do. (FGD_ Gulu)

Discussion

Anchored on the principles of engaged scholarship, this paper examines the contribution of the community social lab approach in promoting the indigenisation of social work education. Community social labs provide the interactive learning environments that allow students to collaborate with diverse stakeholders to identify, assess and implement solutions to local problems. The community social labs emphasise the use of local resources that promote the integration of theoretical knowledge with practical experiences (Hassan, 2014; Timmermans et al., 2020). Based on engaged scholar's first-hand experiences, these findings offer a deeper understanding of how ES can reshape and contextualise social work education in a low-resource context like Uganda. The narratives from students underscore the transformative potential of aligning social work curricula with the cultural, social and economic realities of local communities in ways that not only promote community-university partnerships, but transform the educational experiences of social work students.

The findings suggest that social labs diverge significantly from some traditional social work methodologies by promoting collaborative partnerships, and building resilience through shared efforts. They facilitate a diverse array of stakeholder interactions, and

their efficacy hinges upon the active involvement of various community members. This participatory framework allows for the emergence of grassroots initiatives, showcasing the innovative potential inherent in social labs.

Students emphasised that the key difference between the social lab approach and traditional fieldwork placements lies in the practical, hands-on nature of social labs. Social labs provide an active and engaging environment to identify, plan and implement activities that address specific societal needs, offering a more dynamic and immersive learning experience. Social labs set themselves apart from conventional field practicums, which typically confine students to formal settings with minimal human interaction. Through knowledge sharing, engagement and cultural exchange, social labs allow students to immerse themselves in communities, which contrast sharply with traditional internships.

As a component of engaged scholarship, community social labs emphasise an active involvement of scholars and researchers in real-world problem-solving and community engagement (Boyer, 1996). During the placements, engaged scholars went beyond traditional academic research by promoting meaningful partnerships between academia and society to address pressing social issues. The research settings provided by the community social labs allowed students to experiment with possible solutions in a real-life context, where experts and stakeholders collectively worked together to initiate actions focused on addressing these challenges (Hassan 2014). Engaged scholarship enabled educators, researchers and students in the community social labs to actively collaborate with communities to co-create what Van de Ven 2007) calls knowledge, interventions and policies that have a positive impact on society (Van de Ven, 2007).

Engaging scholars in the social labs further allowed for the integration of academic expertise with the experiential knowledge of practitioners and community members. This collaborative synergy enhanced the relevance and effectiveness of social work education by ensuring that research and practice are informed by the lived experiences and needs of the communities they serve. Engaged Scholarship therefore encouraged reciprocal learning, where scholars not only contributed their expertise, but also gained valuable insights and understanding from their interactions

with communities (Jacobson, Butterill, & Goering, 2005). The labs offered students the opportunity to develop local knowledge by identifying culturally appropriate, long-term solutions that aligned with community values and beliefs, as highlighted by Luwangula et al. (2019). Students' ability to adapt their skills to indigenous practices allowed them to reassess their preconceived notions and relearn the reality shaped by local beliefs. This adaptability helped to build their resilience and better prepare them for the job market. The indigenisation of practices was central to the design of the social labs, with local scholars leading the labs, bringing their expertise on the community's unique challenges and ethos. Unlike traditional internships, the social labs encouraged students to apply classroom theory in independently planning, executing and reporting initiatives. This approach enriched their learning, enhanced professional skills and fostered adaptability in real-world social work contexts, hence contributing to the indigenisation of social work education.

The social labs promoted reflexivity among students, emphasising the reciprocal relationship between academia and the community. Students valued the community's knowledge, fostering a two-way exchange that enriched their educational and personal development. This dynamic interaction underscored the importance of integrating formal education with community-based experiential learning (Kolb et al., 2014). Students' ability to articulate their understanding and purpose reflected a sense of ownership, crucial for the indigenisation of social work education. However, time constraints posed challenges in terms of the depth of engagement and the consolidation of the interventions, thus raising concerns about the long-term impact and sustainability.

Community social labs further foster experimentation and iterative learning by incorporating local knowledge and customs, and improving local solutions (Chicago, 2022; Kolb et al., 2014). Community social labs made social work education more relevant and useful by combining academic knowledge with knowledge from the community. This was done by aligning classroom learning with real-life experiences and community needs. This approach supports ES, which calls for two-way learning in which experts share their knowledge and learn from what others have to say (Jacobson et al., 2005). Such community interaction led to culturally relevant, sustainable solutions with minimal resistance or disengagement (Kiguwa, 2019).

Students' cultural competency facilitated a positive collaboration, aligning with the objectives of indigenous peoples and ES (Tseng et al., 2017). Engaging scholars in community social labs positioned students in natural settings not guided by predetermined project plans, but instead, aimed at proactive experimentation, testing and trying out possible strategies, approaches and solutions at the micro level in order to draw lessons for the systemic level of the addressed societal challenge. Students developed potential solutions, and tested them in the social contexts where these challenges arose (Timmermanns et al., 2020; Kieboom, 2014). As a participatory action research method, the community social labs were viewed as a bridge between theory and practise with a real-world focus (Timmermanns et al., 2020) that offers an agile approach building on the theory of experiential learning for a systematic cyclic exchange between conceptual abstractions and concrete experience (Moon, 2004).

Community social labs in African social work education face challenges such as high expectations, a limited collaboration between academia and external stakeholders, and financial implications. Traditional educational institutions often prioritise conventional teaching and research methods, which may require overcoming bureaucratic hurdles, and gaining support from faculty, administrators and policymakers (Hassan & Datta, 2018). A limited collaboration between academia and external stakeholders also poses challenges (Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton, 2006). Financial implications and sustainability concerns include ongoing resources for facilitation, capacity building, data collection and evaluation, as well as securing sustainable funding from various sources (Jacobson, Butterill, & Goering, 2005). The sustainability of social labs will depend on their ability to deliver tangible outcomes, and demonstrate their impact on addressing social issues. Cultural sensitivity is crucial in designing and conducting social labs in an African context, as misunderstanding or neglecting cultural values can lead to community resistance and disengagement (Kiguwa, 2019). Additionally, the involvement of external researchers and practitioners requires cultural humility and awareness, as adopting a Western-centric lens without acknowledging and respecting African cultural diversity may perpetuate existing power imbalances and colonial legacies. Emphasising cultural competence among social lab participants can help promote mutual learning and a constructive collaboration aligned with indigenisation principles (Chitere, 2018).

While social labs can be effective instruments for promoting innovation and addressing complex issues affecting communities, they must be used with caution due to the risk of dependency syndrome. If not appropriately developed and managed, these labs can unintentionally increase a reliance on external support, resources or interventions. Communities that participate in social labs may come to expect continuous external support, thereby limiting their initiative and self-sufficiency.

Social labs must also be conscious of the power imbalances that can arise between students and community members. In certain circumstances, communities can perceive students as having greater expertise and abilities as a result of their education, thus discouraging local engagement and contributions. This mismatch can lead to community members playing a passive role, relying on students rather than actively participating in co-creating solutions. Such relationships may compromise social labs' authenticity and effectiveness, as long-term and impactful change necessitates a true partnership that values both lived experience and academic knowledge equally.

Recommendations

The study's findings highlight the importance of improving the social lab model's effectiveness and sustainability in order for it to be useful as an approach to ES in Uganda.

As a result, we make the following recommendations: First, the duration of social lab assignments should be increased to allow for more meaningful contact between students and communities. This would allow students to build trust, obtain a better understanding of community dynamics and help devise long-term, culturally relevant interventions. Second, extensive preparatory frameworks should be created to provide students with the essential skills and information before their placements. These frameworks should prioritise cultural humility, community-based participatory techniques and productive stakeholder engagement strategies. Preparing students to navigate power relations and manage expectations in varied community contexts is

critical to maintaining a reflexive and academic approach during fieldwork. Another related difficulty ascribed to insufficient stakeholder involvement is students' limited time in the field, which has an impact on the long-term viability of community social laboratories.

To help reduce the risk of community dependency, social laboratories must prioritise empowering communities, establishing local capacity and developing long-term solutions that can be independently sustained and scaled. Scholars must also be aware of the dangers of unequal power relations, which can occur when academic institutions or researchers control decision-making processes, unintentionally marginalising community perspectives. To help solve this, it is critical to create inclusive workplaces that encourage reciprocal learning, respect and collaborative decision-making. This guarantees that all stakeholders—scholars, practitioners and community members—work together as equals, respecting varied perspectives and lived experiences. Scholars can contribute to more equitable collaborations that empower communities, rather than reinforce hierarchies, by focusing on co-creation and active engagement.

Cultural sensitivity is essential while planning and implementing social laboratories in Africa, as misunderstanding or disregarding cultural norms can lead to community resistance and disengagement. Cultural competence among participants can foster reciprocal learning and constructive collaboration in accordance with indigenisation principles.

Conclusion

Community social labs offer a viable model for engaged scholarship through integrating theory and practice, encouraging reciprocal learning and promoting indigenisation in social work education. However, it faces challenges including short-term interactions, power dynamics and sustainability, which need to be addressed. To effectively improve communities and social work education, social labs must transition from short-term academic interventions to long-term, community-led programmes that promote empowerment and structural transformation. Engaged scholarship must continually challenge existing power structures, ensuring that

knowledge generation is a collaborative and mutually beneficial process for all stakeholders.

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