



Lighthouse

The Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University Journal of Law, Economics and Public Policy

ISSN 2957-8842 (Print)
ISSN 3007-2182 (Online)



Vol. 4 (Issues 1&2), 2025

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Published by the Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University Press
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Lighthouse: The Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University Journal of Law, Economics and Public Policy

ISSN 2957-884 2(Print)

ISSN 3007-2182 (Electronic)

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Criticality of Internal Savings and Lending Schemes in Zimbabwe's Women's Empowerment Drive: Challenges, Gaps and Options

ROSELIN KATSANDE-NCUBE¹

Abstract

The study describes the criticality of Internal Savings and Lending Schemes (ISALS) (*mukando*) in community development and the fostering of empowerment within societies. ISALS, as traditional informal savings and lending schemes, have been around in Africa for ages and have helped women in many communities attain financial independence. ISALS have been used by women as a method for financial viability. The study problematises the criticality of ISALS as a women's empowerment strategy in Zimbabwe to examine the gaps and challenges involved. The study uses a qualitative research methodology with a bias towards a case study research design. The research uses secondary information as the data collection method. The research uses thematic data analysis to analyse the findings. The findings of the research show that ISALS have become a strategy towards women's empowerment through enabling them to access financial assistance to cover their demands. The study findings reveal that ISALS have become a critical strategy for community development, addressing the domestication of women with no sources of income. The research concludes that ISALS have become a critical women's empowerment, enabling women to have social security and community development. The study recommends the creation of monitoring and evaluation committees to ensure inclusivity in ISALS.

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Keywords: domesticity, financial viability, community development, government

INTRODUCTION

The involvement of women in loan and savings associations has been viewed as a strategy towards enhancing women's ownership of assets, facilitating their engagement in household decision-making and enhancing spending on education and health welfare of households, while improving the participation of women outside the home (Ashe and Neilan 2014; Tura *et al.*, 2020). Pamuk *et al.* (2022) argue that ISALS have been used by women as a vehicle for both social and economic change as they have increased their household income. The ISALS have become a strategy for social and economic transformation of women, giving them voices in household matters and spending power. The ISALS have improved the public participation of women in communities, giving them the confidence to participate in public governance.

There are significant gaps in Zimbabwe between the finance, investment pipeline and communities, especially the rural communities, as financial institutions are reluctant to provide services to small widely dispersed customers. In Zimbabwe, financial institutions have exposed people to multiple losses due to the devaluation of currencies and the subsequent failure by the government to arrest inflation. This fear of losing savings to inflation has created gaps between the community and financial institutions. This has led to the search for critical savings and lending schemes away from the government. The study problematises the criticality of ISALS in women's empowerment in Zimbabwe. ISALS have become a solution to the income security challenges in households outside the formal savings and lending schemes. The study moves to understand the importance of ISALS to people in Zimbabwe, despite the vulnerabilities they expose them to.

The research aims to understand the gendered nature of ISALS in Zimbabwe. The study is important as it adds to the existing literature on ISALS. The research is important as it can inform on the role played by women in providing income security outside formal financial systems. The study findings can move beyond the academic confines, transcending into policy-making, informing financial institutions on how to navigate the terrain of the informal sector to encourage people to save with formal financial institutions to reduce the dangers of mismanagement of the savings. It is against the backdrop of the gendered nature of ISALS that the research seeks to examine the perseverance of women in providing income security outside formal lending and savings schemes. .

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This section presents the conceptual framework of the study, the sustainable livelihoods approach/Framework (SLA) or (SLF). The SLA was created in the mid-1980s by researchers Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway, in a bid to assess different contexts of vulnerability and enhance the efficiency of development cooperations (Kollmair and Gamper, 2002). The current SLA emerged out of the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and its promotion in the Agenda 21 (Agenda for 21st Century) where it claimed that everyone must have the opportunity to earn a sustainable livelihood (Morse and McNamara, 2013). This approach supported the equality in opportunities in earning a sustainable life, hence the leaving no one and no place mantra behind Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living (DFID, 2002). A livelihood is sustainable that which can cope and recover from stress and shock, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets while providing livelihoods for the next generation and that contributes net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels in the short and long term (Chambers and Conway, 1992).

There are six core concepts of the SLF that are people-centred, holistic, dynamic, building on strengths, micro-macro links and sustainability (DFID, 2001). A people-centred concept affirms that activities for livelihood improvements will be successful only if development agencies work together with people on their livelihood strategies (Kollmair and Gamper, 2002). This makes the conceptual framework relevant to the study as ISALS have developed as a people-centred approach to women's empowerment towards community development.

The SLA, as a holistic concept, involves understanding stakeholders as a whole to identify major barriers faced by and promising opportunities open to the people, regardless of where they occur (*ibid.*). The holistic concept is applicable to different social groups and geographical spheres and recognises multiple actors such as private companies, public agencies and community-based organisations, while looking to achieve multiple livelihoods outcomes (DFID, 2001). The dynamic concept refers to the process of learning from change to mitigate negative impacts and maximise the positive effects of people's livelihoods and institutions that shape them (*ibid.*). Building strength in the framework of the SLA relates to identification of each individual's potential to achieve their own objectives (Chambers and Conway, 1992). These are important in relation to ISALS as these concepts can improve the performance of the groups with communities building on their weaknesses. The concept builds on micro-macro links to cover gaps at all the levels (Morse and McNamara, 2013). The concept is cognisant of the sustainability that focusses on processes of resilience in face of external shocks and stress to maintain long-term productivity.

DFID (2001) asserts that the SLF presents the main aspects that influence people's livelihoods. The importance of this framework to the current study is that it can bring to the fore the shortcomings of ISALS to women's empowerment and provide links that can reduce

the gaps. The framework is relevant to the study as it presents a holistic approach to development, including all stakeholders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents the literature review of the study around the theme of ISALS around the world. The study reviews the theme of the ISALS providing how they have become a key component of women's household income security outside the formal lending and savings schemes.

Financial viability is the ability to generate income to meet operating payments and debt commitments and where applicable, to allow growth while maintaining service levels (Koleda and Oganisjana, 2015). Informal finance is a contract or agreement conducted without reference or recourse to the legal system to exchange cash in the present for the promise of cash in the future. ISALS are self-help organisations that mobilise their resources mainly from members' savings, borrow to finance their enterprises, repay their loans and share growth, using profits arising from the credit to members and fines (Christenson, 2010). While both informal and microfinance serve poor and unbanked people, informal finance derives from the grassroots, bottom-up demand of the poor or appropriate financial services, whereas microfinance is a mine of lessons to inform the design of microfinance (Bouman, 1995). ISALS serve as a result of the financial viability provided by the lending schemes and the ability of the borrowers to repay their loans.

Community-managed savings and loan programmes have emerged as one of the most powerful tools to draw together the many people and disparate groups that exist within poor communities (Lee *et al.*, 2021). Boonyana (2001) asserts that because they are controlled and operated by community people themselves, savings and loan programmes build a community's resource base as community members can develop themselves and provide for their own needs

both individually and collectively. ISALS are an important mechanism for communities that show self-organisation of society towards social and economic development. However, the World Bank (2016) states that ISALS in Colombia expose women to various vulnerabilities that can lead to abuse in their households if there is mismanagement of the funds in the association. Shaikh *et al.* (2017) argue that group loan defaults present the greatest weak point of ISALS because members can continue to default on the loans without any action being taken, as in most cases, threats remain as such, only threats, with no action.

Women play a critical role in the economic development of their families and communities but certain obstacles, such as poverty, unemployment, low household income and societal discrimination mostly in developing countries, have hindered their effective performance in that role (Wechabe *et al.*, 2022). Structural issues limit the performance of women in economic development, therefore, most of them embark on entrepreneurial activities to support their families (Maru *et al.*, 2013). These entrepreneurial activities are hampered by limited access to financial institutions as women lack assets to use as collateral security in developing countries. They continue to be under-represented and their success often remains invisible and unacknowledged (Omondi and Jagongo, 2018). This under-representation leads to the formation of ISALS.

Pamuk *et al.* (2022) define ISALS as informal finance contracts or agreements or recourse to the legal system to exchange cash in the present for the promise of cash in the future. ISALS are self-help organisations that mobilise their resources mainly from members' savings, borrow to finance their medium-small enterprises, repay the loans and share the growth profits (Nasong'o and Osoro, 2019). A Kirimi *et al.* (2019) study in Kenya observes that households in that country reported the transformation of livelihoods through ISALS as assets acquisition was another result. Brannen (2010) notes that in

Tanzania, ISALS have provided improvements in the economic and social welfare of households' growth and diversification in income-generating activities. ISALS have transformed societies through empowering women with autonomy and buying power, giving them a chance to acquire the assets they need.

In Zambia, ISALS have improved households' wealth and financial preparedness to meet the needs of expecting mothers in rural areas (Lee *et al.*, 2021). Care International (2014) notes that women participating in ISALS in Uganda had contributed greatly to the welfare of their families enabling them to pay bills. Participation in ISALS is associated with the empowerment of women to provide for their families from the profits shared. Marie-Katherine (2014) observes that female-headed households improved their social and economic statuses and strengthened social relations. Maffioli *et al.*, (2021) allude that in Zambia, ISALS are a promising intervention that can assist rural populations by increasing financial resources and financial preparedness. Ouma (2022) holds the view that money earned through ISALS is often used by caregivers' households to pay fees and buy uniforms and school supplies for children within their care. It can be argued that ISALS have become a financial system that helps alleviate poverty in poor communities, while empowering poor communities with income security.

Despite the benefits that are associated with ISALS, some views present dangers associated with the schemes (Mbithe, 2020). Due to poor record-keeping in ISALS, women suffer gender-based violence (GBV) due to misuse of money (Omondi and Jagongo, 2018). Burlando and Canidio (2021) note that ISALS are associated with the use of threats in the case of failure to repay and this can create problems within households as the male partners can react to these threats by abusing their partners and blaming them for exposing the family to debts. Pamuk *et al.*, note that despite ISALS being celebrated as a

mechanism of empowerment, they expose communities to vulnerabilities such as community members being scammed by fellow members in the association. Members can borrow and deliberately not repay the loan. It can be said that, despite being widely celebrated, ISALS pose a danger to married women, because when savings are lost, women bear the blame.

Musinguzi (2024) asserts that having relatives in group-lending schemes with joint liability can increase the loan default rates, showing that social ties within the group do not always lead to better performance, making ISALS a risk for women as they bear the failure of the scheme in their families. It can be argued that there are risks and gaps in the ISALS loan default collection enforcement, as the use of threats does not present a serious method of debt collection. There is need for written agreements and collateral security systems to protect the women and their investments.

Despite the shortcomings, ISALS still present an alternative savings and lending scheme that provides communities with development initiatives at no cost. The shared profits and losses make ISALS a preferred empowerment programme as it helps in the creation of solidarity.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This section presents the research methodology that is the research approach, research design, data collection methods and data analysis, case study research approach understanding of how critical are ISALS in women's empowerment and community development within societies. The appeal of qualitative research methodology as Busseto *et al.* (2020) observe, is based on disciplines of social sciences and, therefore, allows for in-depth and further probing of social facts allowing the research to understand hidden facts within a research question.

The study uses secondary information (newspaper reports, Google Scholar articles) for data collection as observed by Cheng (2014) that secondary information data set is typically already cleaned and stored in electronic format, so the research can spend time on understanding the data rather than preparing and cleaning the data set. This method helps the research gain information on how critical ISALS are in community development and fostering of empowerment within societies.

The study uses thematic data analysis to analyse the study findings and understand them and placing into different categories. Dawadi (2020) observes that thematic the data analysis allure is its methodological flexibility which does not require the rigid application of predetermined categories or theoretical frameworks, making it an approachable choice for the study.

FINDINGS

The section presents the findings of the study, based on the theme of the criticality of ISALS and their challenges and gaps in Zimbabwe. The findings provide information on the criticality of ISALS in community development and women's empowerment.

ISALS are critical for community development and women's empowerment. Kabonga and Zvokuomba (2020) note that ISALS target all women in communities, enabling that no one is left behind, in this developmental aspect, empowering them. Chibanda *et al.* (2024) allude that ISALS are critical in women's empowerment as they have been taught to women living with disabilities to foster income security. Chitema and Chitongo (2020) observe how ISALS emerged to deal with societal constraints and social norms that make it difficult for women to leave their roles for public roles outside homes by empowering them with income-generating ideas. ISALS are critical in Zimbabwean communities as they empower women by providing them with income generation ideas outside the formal financial savings and lending institutions.

In addition, *Al Jazeera* (30 June 2024) has a story on a community savings scheme in Zimbabwe that has a critical support system for women as it gives them financial independence and autonomy in the household. ISALS have become a critical component of community development in Zimbabwe empowering women to have voices in their households. ISALS have become critical in the communities as they have helped women address household power dynamics by improving their purchasing power. ISALS have become a critical step towards women's empowerment as it they provide lending and savings schemes without requiring stringent documentation and collateral security that rural women lack (Zimbabwe Price Check, 9 December 2024). ISALS have become a critical component of women's empowerment through their guaranteed financial inclusion.

Furthermore, besides being an empowerment tool, ISALS have been used as a strategy critical for households stability. Chitema and Chitongo (2020) allude that ISALS provide community-based financial support to women by providing loans to fund and meet household demands. Chivasa (2018) observes that ISALS have become critical in providing income security for rural women to access household assets. Chikoko *et al.* (2024) note that ISALS are critical non-formal community development strategies of empowerment working as an indigenous social protection strategy for marginalised women. ISALS have become critical in the provision of informal community development as they have been used as guarantees for social security by women accessing assets.

ISALS have gaps despite their criticality in women's empowerment and community development which has led to their failure to transform livelihoods. Moyo *et al.* (2024) note that regardless of the importance of ISALS in building women's empowerment, there is an increased vulnerability and exclusion of women with disabilities despite the implementation of ISALS by the Zimbabwe Government.

In addition, there has been lack of monitoring and evaluation in ISALS' implementation and operation, making them less efficient. This makes it impossible to recommend ISALS as strategies for community development and women's empowerment. Ndhlovu and Mudzingwa (2022) note that monitoring and evaluation are the missing link in Zimbabwean ISALS as they give feedback to the government and its development partners. Gudza (2018) observes that monitoring and evaluation promote transparency in development efforts such as ISALS. The lack of monitoring and evaluation limits the transparency of the ISALS, making them a weak community development strategy. The inclusion of monitoring and evaluation into ISALS can improve their criticality in community development.

Furthermore, there has been some gaps in terms of ISALS and transparency due to poor book and record-keeping among women. Mbizi and Gwangwava (2013) note that there is need for the assistance of women in ISALS because there is a lack of knowledge among the women as the clubs lack written or legal contracts and have no enforcement or any form of collateral security, making it easy for loan defaults. Chitema and Chitongo (2020) observe how the lack of appreciation of the importance of record-keeping has created problems for ISALS in Zimbabwe for households involved in the schemes, making it impossible for women to do it own their own without training monitoring and evaluation. Chitongo (2020) observes that accountability and transparency are important in group dynamics and failure to keep records leads to intentional and unintentional failure to pay back loans.

ISALS have become a critical strategy towards women's empowerment through the provision of lending and savings platforms that provide income stability for women. The findings show that ISALS have become a strategy for community development to support women in accessing assets and gain a voice in the public domain. The study shows that there are gaps in terms of inclusion of vulnerable

groups, poor book-keeping and lack of accountability in ISALS. It is enough to say ISALS have the potential of spearheading community development and women's empowerment when women are trained in book-keeping. Despite the shortcomings, ISALS still present an alternative savings and lending scheme that provides communities with development initiatives at no cost. The shared profits and losses make ISALS a preferred empowerment programme as it helps in the creation of solidarity.

DISCUSSION

The study examines the criticality of ISALS as a women's empowerment strategy in communities within Zimbabwe. ISALS have become a critical strategy towards women's empowerment in Zimbabwe. The ISALS have been used as a strategy to empower women through the improvement of their financial inclusion, providing them with financial security. ISALS have also empowered women to have income security while addressing household power dynamics by giving them financial security. ISALS are critical in helping women access assets and household properties that banks and other financial institutions cannot provide for them due to lack of collateral security. Similar to the study findings are Parker *et al.* (2020), who allude that ISALS have become a critical aspect of society, as they have been used for women's empowerment and community engagement, giving marginalised members of society a chance towards development. This indicates how ISALS have become critical in the empowerment of women and the creation of financial inclusion.

In addition, ISALS have become a strategy that is critical for the empowerment of women through the provision of financial independence and autonomy. ISALS have enabled women to create financial stability in their households through the financing of their enterprises. ISALS women's empowerment has created community development, enabling communities to establish social security for the families. ISALS become critical in this regard as they provide

financial security and stability in households. They have empowered women in enabling them to access assets by helping them participate in the public domain. In support of the findings of the study by Muchenje (2018,) contends that ISALS have become a strategy towards women's empowerment that is critical, as it gives women a chance to achieve some form of equality by addressing household power dynamics.

The research findings show that there are challenges and gaps in ISALS that create problems for their role in women's empowerment. Women cannot go it alone in the ISALS as they lack the knowledge of record-keeping. The lack of record-keeping indicates a challenge in ISALS as it is a testament to the lack of accountability and transparency which can weaken the empowerment intent. The lack can lead to unintentional or intentional default on the loans by members of the association. The study reveals that there is no legal recourse to enforce the collection of the loans. to deal with this challenge, the government and other development partners can borrow from Holmes (2020), who observes that in Malawi, it was found that the government uses a specific monitoring and evaluation framework for ISALS that works in helping in training the beneficiaries of ISALS on book- and record-keeping. This can address the challenges and gaps in ISALS to empower women.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the study show that ISALS have become a critical initiative in women's empowerment through the creation of financial stability and social security. Overall, the research findings present ISALS as a critical strategy towards empowering women, while addressing inequalities in societies through the provision of financial knowledge to community members arming them towards fighting poverty. In conclusion, ISALS have provided a critical bridging strategy for women's empowerment by enabling women to finance their enterprises without having to provide collateral security.

The study recommends the inclusion of women with disabilities, HIV&AIDS in ISALS. The study recommends government support in providing book-keeping knowledge to women in ISALS. The research recommends the training of ISALS participants in legalising the lending system to reduce defaults. The study recommends the creation of monitoring and evaluation committees to understand the effectiveness of ISALS on women's empowerment in Zimbabwe. The study recommends the inclusion of women living with.

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