Assessing the Perceived University-Community Consulting Services for Sustainable Development: Insights from the Open University of Tanzania

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the university-community consulting services for sustainable development: Insights from the Open University of Tanzania. The study aimed to explore the consulting services provided by the Open University of Tanzania; assess their impact in community development; identify challenges in university-community engagement. A study was informed by interpretive paradigm. A qualitative approach was employed using an exploratory case study design, conducted at the Open University of Tanzania. The study involved 37 respondents who shared their perceptions through interviews and online group discussion forum. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, through online group discussions and document reviews, and analyzed using content analysis. The findings indicate that the consulting services that are provided by the university are strategy consulting, e-commerce consulting, governance consulting, marketing consulting, management consulting, information technology consulting, human resources

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consulting, leadership consulting, environmental consulting, innovation consulting, public relations consulting and business process consulting. In terms of impact, it was disclosed that consulting services positively influenced the community, contributing to development across various sectors. The challenges identified included difficulties in quantifying the value of consulting services, limited staff engagement with the community, and bureaucratic hurdles. The study concluded that it is high time for universities in collaboration with private sectors to reflect on the consulting services they offer to the community in order to meet the needs of diverse population. Finally, the study recommends that the university prioritize the quantification of consulting services and enhancing staff training on community engagement services.

1. INTRODUCTION

University-community engagements are essential for implementing sustainable development goals globally. By engaging with communities, universities can connect with external stakeholders, generate social impact, and enhance public engagement strategies (Spanu, Ulmeanu, &Doicin, 2024). Universities are increasingly expected to balance academic excellence with societal impact (Kelly & Given, 2024), while also playing a vital role in fostering open knowledge-building activities within their communities (Kori & Pata, 2024). Achieving this requires a clear commitment to public engagement, well-documented consulting policies, and increased investment in training and resources (Spanu, Ulmeanu, &Doicin, 2024). Moreover, these engagements shift citizens from being passive consumers of government services to active participants in governance (Kori & Pata, 2024). The contributions of universities to sustainable community development are significant, as they develop strategies for community engagement (Bruning, McGrew, & Cooper, 2006). A university's core functions must align with its role within the community, emphasizing its commitment to local development (Albulescu & Albulescu, 2014). However, there is insufficient investigation into the sustainability of consulting services offered by universities, limiting our understanding of their contributions to community development (Bruning, McGrew, & Cooper, 2006). University consulting services are pivotal for transforming individuals into holistic, value-oriented citizens who contribute to community development (Ekene & Oluoch-Suleh, 2015). This transformation underscores the necessity of assessing the sustainable contributions of university consulting services to community development (Albulescu, 2014).

Moreover, Preece (2017) notes that universities are increasingly positioned at the forefront of knowledge production, application, and transfer; yet, there remains a dearth of research on their contributions, particularly regarding consulting services. Traditionally, universities have served three core functions: teaching, research, and community service (Cluguston& Calder, 2000). Many universities historically focused on knowledge creation and dissemination for elite social strata, often perceived as "ivory towers" disconnected from community issues (Kuhsen, 1978; Togo, 2009). Universities are now compelled to engage more directly with their surrounding communities through consulting services, reinforcing the need for impactful and sustainable engagement (Bowden & Marton, 1998).Perceptions of university contributions to community engagement vary across institutions. Some view it as knowledge transfer, while others see it as entrepreneurial activities aimed at generating income (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008; Clark, 1998). Community engagement practices encompass a wide range of activities, including knowledge generation, entrepreneurship, cultural initiatives, and collaboration with other institutions (Farrar & Taylor, 2009). Terminologies such as community services, outreach, extension services, and consultancy services further illustrate this diversity (Bender, 2008). Ultimately, strengthening the relationship between university consulting services and local communities is essential, ensuring that both parties benefit from high-quality and relevant services that meet community needs.

According to Rubin (2000), effective university-community engagement necessitates partnerships between universities and local communities. Kruss (2012) highlights the importance of these partnerships in fostering knowledge production and societal interaction, particularly in developing countries. Preece

(2013) emphasizes the need for studies examining the learning benefits for community, staff, and student participants. Schalkwyk (2014) conceptualizes engagement as interconnectedness, describing the dynamic relationship between academics and external partners.Moreover, Hlalele, Manicom, Preece, & Tsotetsi (2015) compared how students and community members applied their knowledge through various engagement activities. Anderson (2016) proposes developing inter-professional teams among community-university partners to leverage academic resources and enhance engagement. Kruss (2014) brings together researchers and policymakers to explore how universities can better interact with marginalized communities, promoting inclusive development.As Machimana (2017) points out, understanding the experiences of various community engagement partners, including non-researchers, is crucial for advancing global citizenship in higher education. Plooy (2017) highlights the increasing concern over the social relevance and impact of universities in today's complex landscape. Gastrow, Kruss, Bolaane, &Esemu (2017) argue that universities have established structures for participative knowledge-building, benefiting both communities and universities through local knowledge exchange.

Chatterton (2000) examines university-community interactions in Bristol, UK, revealing the cultural roles universities play in fostering a shared public culture. Strier (2011) notes that building effective partnerships between universities and communities remains a complex task fraught with challenges. Despite many academics not prioritizing community engagement (Müller-Christ et al., 2007), evidence suggests that university-community partnerships can yield significant benefits in research, teaching, and community recognition. Winter, Wiseman, & Muirhead (2006) conclude that the rise of community engagement movements presents universities with opportunities to enhance citizenship and contribute to community social and economic development. University-community engagements are increasingly recognized as essential for achieving sustainable development goals globally. However, in Tanzania, there is a notable gap in understanding how these engagements translate into tangible benefits for local communities. While existing literature emphasizes the importance of universities engaging with their surrounding communities to foster social impact and enhance public engagement strategies, there is limited research focused on the specific contributions of Tanzanian universities to community development.

The critical issues in this study are not only to discuss about consulting services but how they are embraced and translated in the communities and elsewhere and how they apply to lives of people. How relevant are consulting services offered by universities and private sectors to the community? How do the current consulting services translated to the lives of people in the community how is the sustainability of consulting services offered by the universities for community development? Therefore, this study intended to disentangle the existing cacophony by addressing about perceived university-community engagement on consulting services for sustainable development. The specific objectives of the study were to explore the consulting services provided by the Open University of Tanzania; assess their impact in economic development; identify challenges in university-community engagement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section presents a literature review focusing on theoretical literature, studies related to community engagement, exploring current trends in higher education engagement and their implications for sustainable development in Tanzania.

2.1 Theoretical Literature

The study employed System Perspective Theory. In applying a systems perspective theory to community engagement (CE), the analysis extends beyond individual interventions to consider the broader contextual factors that influence complex social problems. This approach recognizes that CE does not occur in a vacuum but is embedded within larger social, political, and institutional frameworks. By examining these factors, scholars can better understand the underlying dynamics that shape how engagement initiatives are implemented and their outcomes (Ogunsanya & Govender, 2019). This broader lens allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities that arise when higher education institutions engage with communities, especially in contexts marked by inequality and limited resources. Recent studies have further highlighted the importance of considering systemic factors, such as local governance

structures and policy frameworks, in shaping effective CE strategies (Jones & Hiller, 2022). The institutional infrastructure within universities plays a pivotal role in supporting and sustaining CE efforts. This includes a range of structural elements, such as institutional policies, dedicated campus engagement offices or units, human resources, and funding mechanisms. These components form the foundation upon which CE initiatives are built and provide the necessary support for their successful execution (Ogunsanya & Govender, 2019). For example, having clear institutional policies and leadership that prioritize community engagement can align academic and operational goals with broader societal needs. Additionally, dedicated offices or units tasked with managing CE can ensure that initiatives are well-coordinated, adequately funded, and monitored effectively. Recent research also underscores the importance of integrating CE into the strategic planning processes of universities, positioning it as a central aspect of institutional missions (Ahmed & Palermo, 2023; Deans & Thomas, 2024).

Furthermore, the systems supporting CE must be designed to foster long-term sustainability and continuous improvement. This includes not only providing adequate resources but also ensuring that there are mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of community engagement activities. The presence of robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems ensures that CE initiatives are regularly assessed, and adjustments are made based on feedback from community stakeholders. Such systems help to guarantee that CE projects remain relevant, responsive, and effective in addressing community needs (Ogunsanya & Govender, 2019). Moreover, recent studies emphasize the need for universities to develop comprehensive reward systems that recognize and incentivize faculty and staff for their involvement in community engagement, as well as to create platforms that allow for the exchange of knowledge and best practices among stakeholders (Singh et al., 2022). This holistic approach, where institutional support, strategic direction, and continuous evaluation converge, provides a sustainable platform for community engagement in higher education.

2.2 Community Engagement

Community engagement is commonly defined as the meaningful involvement of marginalized and underserved groups—those most affected by normative recommendations but often excluded from the processes that shape these recommendations (Narasimhan et al., 2024). It has become a crucial catalyst for sustainable development, particularly in developing countries, by fostering collaboration, empowerment, and collective ownership (Rahmawati & Hendratno, 2023). Despite its recognized importance, however, many researchers demonstrate a limited understanding of effective community engagement methods, thereby undermining the potential for genuine participation and hindering the achievement of sustainable development goals (Ahmed & Palermo, 2010). While community engagement is positioned as a key driver of innovation and creativity, the reality often falls short of this ideal, prompting questions about the effectiveness of current engagement strategies in achieving long-term sustainable outcomes (Anthony, 2024). This gap highlights the need for a critical assessment of how community engagement can unlock valuable insights, foster social cohesion, and balance economic development with environmental preservation and cultural sustainability (Rahmawati & Hendratno, 2023). It is clear that successful community engagement should be more than a theoretical ideal—it must lead to tangible results that improve lives and empower communities to shape their futures.

An increasing body of literature suggests that community-based engagement initiatives are facing significant challenges, particularly in relation to livelihoods, decentralization, and sustainability (Ojha et al., 2016). These challenges often stem from a lack of effective guidelines and frameworks, particularly in the peer-review process for evaluating research proposals involving community engagement, where community perspectives are frequently undervalued (Ahmed & Palermo, 2010). This reflects a broader systemic issue within the research community, where the true value of community-driven knowledge is not always acknowledged. As nations confront the complexities of the 21st century, the role of community engagement is often hailed as a cornerstone of sustainable development. However, this role requires more than just rhetorical support—it demands substantial resources and genuine commitment from all stakeholders involved (Rahmawati &Hendratno, 2023). Empowering communities to determine their own futures based on collective wisdom and resilience requires building relationships grounded in respect, trust, and shared purpose.

Such relationships are critical for developing effective strategies that promote equitable health and social outcomes (Narasimhan et al., 2024).

However, existing policies often emphasize community participation without addressing the deeper, systemic factors that influence how communities are engaged within broader social contexts. Recent studies have highlighted that local communities are more complex than previously assumed, with their actions being heavily influenced by wider social, political, and environmental contexts (Ojha et al., 2016). This complexity further complicates efforts to foster meaningful engagement. While community engagement has long been central to liberal democratic theory, its implementation is often subsumed by managerial approaches that prioritize efficiency and outcomes over genuine democratic participation (Head, 2007). There is a growing call for higher educations institutions to enhance community engagement in service design and delivery, recognizing the need for deeper, more meaningful involvement of communities in decision-making processes (Moore et al., 2016). However, the lack of consensus on what constitutes effective community engagement highlights a troubling disconnect between policy intentions and real-world practices, revealing a significant gap between the rhetoric and the reality of community involvement (Moore et al., 2016).This disparity underscores the urgent need for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of community engagement—one that moves beyond superficial participation and fosters genuine partnerships where communities have a true stake in shaping their futures.

2.3 Current Trends in Higher Education Community Engagement

Community engagement has emerged as a significant and growing trend in higher education, extending beyond the confines of academic institutions to become a key pillar of the broader societal landscape (Saltmarsh, 2017). It is increasingly recognized as a vital component of the traditional academic roles of teaching and research (Ogunsanya & Govender, 2019), and its centrality is now deemed essential for the future success of higher education. Engagement is crucial for achieving the core mission of universities, particularly in the context of the knowledge enterprise (Roberts, 2018). In today's rapidly changing environment, higher education institutions are under pressure to adapt. This is reflected not only in the evolving demands of teaching and learning but also in the strategic integration of community engagement into institutional goals (Klemencic & Ashwin, 2015; Alqahtani, 2024). Global trends, such as changing student demographics, the growing participation of non-traditional students, digital interconnectedness, and the increasing marketization of higher education, are reshaping the landscape of higher education and influencing engagement strategies (Klemencic & Ashwin, 2015).

Contemporary community engagement in higher education is defined by its scholarly nature, as it is seen as an integral aspect of learning and discovery that enhances academic programs (Roberts, 2018). A key tenet of this approach is the recognition that knowledge and expertise are not confined to the academy; valuable learning opportunities exist outside academic settings as well (Roberts, 2018). As such, successful community engagement is increasingly seen as a way to achieve high-quality, efficient, and collaborative outcomes in addressing complex social issues (De Weger et al., 2018). Community engagement in higher education often involves collaborative efforts to address societal challenges by working directly with local, national, and even global communities (Mittal & Bansal, 2024). These engagements are not only seen as opportunities for problem-solving but also as dynamic processes that can shape the relationships between institutions and diverse communities (Mittal & Bansal, 2024). This shift towards collaboration represents a disruptive change in the way knowledge is generated and who is considered an expert. Solutions to complex problems—whether social, political, environmental, or health-related—are now recognized as more effective when developed through collaborative knowledge generation rather than relying solely on specialized academic expertise (Saltmarsh, 2017). The idea of community engagement as a form of social responsibility is particularly relevant for public and land-grant universities, which are expected to fulfill a societal contract by producing knowledge that benefits society and preparing students for active, productive citizenship (Roberts, 2018). This new framework for scholarship emphasizes the impact of community-engaged research rather than just its academic products (Roberts, 2018). As such, higher education institutions are increasingly prioritizing meaningful collaboration with external stakeholders to address critical socio-economic

and developmental challenges (Ogunsanya & Govender, 2019).

Despite the growing emphasis on community engagement, there are complexities in its implementation. While it is promoted as a tool for empowerment, community engagement can sometimes inadvertently reinforce existing power imbalances or exacerbate social inequalities (Dempsey, 2010). Moreover, the rise of international competition and the growing implementation of community engagement initiatives across the globe have led to diverse interpretations and practices of engagement, adding to its complexity (Koekkoek et al., 2021). The literature highlights that 'meaningful participation' in community engagement can only be achieved if organizational processes are adapted to be inclusive, accessible, and supportive of all participants (De Weger et al., 2018). Additionally, the intersection of societal needs with the aspirations of change-makers presents an exciting new frontier for engagement, opening up opportunities for innovative collaborations (Mittal & Bansal, 2024). Ultimately, community engagement has the potential to empower communities, enhancing their capacity to address local challenges and promoting sustainable change (Ahmed & Palermo, 2010). This collaborative turn in higher education is part of a larger societal shift that has fundamentally altered the way institutions engage with the world around them (Saltmarsh, 2017).

2.4 Sustainable Development in Tanzania

Sustainable development seeks to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Mittal & Bansal, 2024). It involves the integration of economic, social, and environmental considerations to create a balanced and enduring model of progress (Mittal & Bansal, 2024). Central to achieving sustainable development is a sustainability-oriented educational approach, which promotes holistic thinking aimed at benefiting all living organisms and future generations. Such an approach equips individuals with the skills needed to enhance their quality of life responsibly (Kumari & Dutta, 2024). A key driver of localization of sustainable development initiatives includes multiple stakeholders such as governments, civil society organizations, the UN, and members of parliament, all of whom contribute to the ongoing review process at the UN High-Level Political

Forum (Jönsson & Bexell, 2021). This collaborative mindset empowers global citizens to make informed decisions that do not compromise the well-being of the planet (Kumari & Dutta, 2024).

The centralization has created significant challenges, as the national-level meta-governance structures have proven dysfunctional due to poorly designed coordination mechanisms for collaborative engagement (Lauwo, 2022). The limited involvement of key stakeholders, including those from network and market-based governance arrangements, has exacerbated difficulties in achieving the SDGs, especially in developing countries like Tanzania (Lauwo, 2022). Moreover, despite increasing research on the UN's 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs, there is still insufficient attention to the role of political institutions in the effective localization of the SDGs (Jönsson & Bexell, 2021).

The role of **e**ducation in advancing sustainable development has been widely acknowledged, especially in the narrative leading up to the release of the SDGs. A UNESCO report, for instance, underscores the importance of education in driving global aspirations for sustainable development (Adamson & Brown, 2024). It is widely agreed that quality education is critical to achieving sustainable development, particularly in equipping graduates with the necessary skills for employability within both cultural and natural contexts (King et al., 2019). However, while quality educationis seen as a prerequisite for achieving the SDGs, there remains a significant disparity in access, especially in rural communities where resources are disproportionately inadequate (Tengecha, 2024).

Furthermore, education's role as a pillar of development hinges on its ability to address the specific challenges faced by societies. This is why several international forums have emphasized the need for sustainable education strategies (King et al., 2019). However, despite these global calls for reform, it appears that little has been done to ensure the sustainability of education systems in developing countries, such as Tanzania (King et al., 2019). In practice, the experiences of individual children in schools often seem disconnected from global discourses on educational quality and equity, as well as from the broader achievement of the SDGs (Adamson & Brown, 2024). The gap between global policy-making and classroom practices is further

compounded by the complexities and heterogeneity of local contexts, shaped by various socio-economic, political, and cultural factors (Adamson & Brown, 2024). Challenges to the localization of the SDGs are further compounded by a variety of obstacles, including unclear allocation of responsibility, insufficient coordination among stakeholders, high turnover of personnel in key positions, a lack of data availability, low public awareness of the SDGs, a shortage of resources, and shrinking democratic space (Jönsson & Bexell, 2021). These barriers significantly hinder the effective implementation of sustainable development initiatives, particularly in contexts such as Tanzania, where the governance structures are not conducive to collaborative engagement and holistic development.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in an interpretive paradigm and employs a qualitative approach utilizing a case study design. This design is particularly suited for exploring the complex interactions and perceptions surrounding university-community engagements within the context of sustainable development. The research was conducted at the Open University of Tanzania (OUT), which has established various consulting services for community engagement, making it an ideal setting for examining the impacts and challenges of these engagements. The study involved 37 participants selected through snowball and purposive sampling. These participants included university staff engaged in providing consulting services at OUT. This diverse group offered a range of perspectives on the effectiveness of university-community engagements. Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews and online focus group discussions (FGDs), allowing for in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions and insights regarding university-community engagements on consulting services and their perceived effects on sustainable development. To supplement the FGDs, a documentary review was conducted to analyze existing documents that outline the university's consulting policies, community engagement strategies, and previous reports on community impacts. Data were analyzed using content analysis. This involved transcribing the semi-structured interview and focus group discussions and coding the transcripts to identify common themes, patterns, and perceptions related to university-community engagements and sustainable development. Findings from the FGDs were triangulated with insights from the documentary review to validate and enrich the analysis. Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the study. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by ensuring that participants' identities were kept confidential and that data were stored securely to safeguard their privacy. Prior to commencing the research, ethical approval was sought from the Directorate of Research and Publication at the Open University of Tanzania.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Demographic Profile of the Participants

The demographic profile of the study participants includes both male and female lecturers, with 14 males and 13 females. In terms of age, 20 participants were between the ages of 50 and 60, while 17 participants were aged between 25 and 49 years. All participants had significant professional experience, ranging from 3 to 15 years. Regarding educational qualifications, 10 participants held the position of assistant lecturers, while 27 participants were PhD holders or above. The inclusion of these variables was important as they may provide diverse perspectives on the university-community engagement, reflecting different generational, gender, and academic backgrounds. The summary is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Demographic profile of study participants

Category	Variable	Frequency (n = 27)	Percentage
Gender	Male	14	51.9%
	Female	13	48.1%
Age Group	50–60 years	20	54.1%
	25–49 years	17	45.9%
Experience (Years)	3–15 years	37	100%
Academic Qualification	Assistant Lecturers	10	27.0%
	PhD Holders or Above	27	73.0%

4.2 Summary of the Perceived University-Community Engagements

The study examined the perceived university-community engagements on consulting services for sustainable development in Tanzania, specifically focusing on the consulting services offered, their impacts, and the challenges faced. Results disclosed that **81%** (30 out of 37) participants acknowledged that the university provides a diverse range of consulting services to the community. These services encompass strategy consulting, e-commerce consulting, governance consulting, marketing consulting, management consulting, information technology consulting, human resources consulting, leadership consulting, environmental consulting, innovation consulting, public relations consulting, and business process consulting. Conversely, **19%** (7 out of 37) participants expressed unfamiliarity with these offerings. In terms of impact, **95%** (35 out of 37) participants reported that the consulting services have positively influenced the community, contributing to development across various sectors. However, **5%** (2 participants) were not aware of this perspective. Despite the perceived benefits, **89%** (33 out of 37) participants identified several challenges associated with university-community engagements aimed at sustainable development. These challenges included difficulties in quantifying the value of consulting services, limited staff engagement with the community, and bureaucratic hurdles that hindered effective coordination. Meanwhile, **11%** (4 participants) were unaware of these issues. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 shows the overall summary of the response from the participants. However, based on the specific objectives of the study the summary is presented as follows:

4.3 Consulting Services Offered by the University to the Community

The findings indicate that **81%** (30 out of 37) participants acknowledged that the university provides a diverse range of consulting services to the community. These services encompass strategy consulting, e-commerce consulting, governance consulting, marketing consulting, management consulting, information technology consulting, human resources consulting, leadership consulting, environmental consulting, innovation consulting, public relations consulting, and business process consulting. Conversely,

19% (7 out of 37) participants expressed unfamiliarity with these offerings. One of the participants aware of these consulting services argued as follows:

> "Our collaboration with the community has significantly improved the relevance of our consulting services. We've learned to align our projects more closely with community needs, which have enhanced their effectiveness. Engaging with the community has transformed our approach to education. We no longer view our role as merely transferring knowledge; instead, we actively listen and adapt our strategies based on community feedback." (University Staff no. 12, OUT, October 2024).

Contributing on the same another participant added that:

> "The university has managed to provide service to the community in the areas of commerce consulting, governance consulting, marketing consulting, management consulting, information technology consulting, human resources consulting, leadership consulting, environmental consulting, innovation consulting, public relations consulting, and business process consulting" (University Staff no. 7, OUT, October 2024).

Another participant added that:

> "The university's commitment to community engagement is reflected in our policies. We have managed to offer numerous consulting services to the community. They not only guide our actions but also serve as a framework for measuring our impact on sustainable development. I believe that our health initiatives have significantly improved awareness in the community. We've empowered individuals to take charge of their health, which is crucial for long-term development." (University Staff no. 3, OUT, October 2024).

It was further argued by another participant as follows:

> "Communities should be involved in university initiatives aimed at solving specific problems. For example, in Kagera, the banana industry is struggling, and universities could lead collaborative efforts

Table 2. Summary of perceived university-community engagements on consulting services for sustainable development

Category	Response Type	Number of participants (n = 37)	Percentage
Awareness of Consulting Services	Aware	30	81%
	Unaware	7	19%
Perceived Impact of Consulting Services	Positive Impact	35	95%
	No Impact	2	5%
Perceived Challenges in Engagements	Aware of Challenges	33	89%
	Unaware of Challenges	4	11%

to address these challenges." (University Staff no- 15, October 2024). With university-community linkage, experts will provide awareness in the areas related to environment management.

Supporting the same idea about consulting services, it was argued by another participant as follows:

"Investing in social capital is crucial, especially for unconventional programs like medical and engineering fields. This investment could pave the way for partnerships that benefit both students and the local community. We need to actively explore how to tap into local opportunities in sectors like agriculture and mining through consultancies. Universities should be at the forefront of identifying these opportunities and facilitating relevant training and support." (University Staff no. 24, October 2024).

Thus, the extracts above indicate that the university-community engagement succeeded to offer consulting services in the areas of governance consulting, marketing consulting, management consulting, information technology consulting, human resources consulting, leadership consulting, environmental consulting, innovation consulting, public relations consulting, and business process consulting.

4.4 The Impacts of University Community Engagement

Regarding the impacts of university community engagement impact, **95%** (35 out of 37) participants reported that the consulting services have positively influenced the community, contributing to development across various sectors. However, **5%** (2 participants) were not aware of this perspective. One of the participants argued:

"Strategy consulting from the university has been invaluable for local businesses looking to refine their goals and enhance their competitive edge in the market. It equips local entrepreneurs with the tools they need to thrive in the digital marketplace, which is crucial in today's economy.The governance consulting service has helped local governments improve their decision-making processes, making them more transparent and accountable to the community." (University Staff no. 4, October 2024)

Another participant argued.

"Marketing consulting has enabled small businesses to craft effective campaigns, allowing them to reach a wider audience and boost their sales significantly. Management consulting from the university provides organizations with insights into optimizing their operations, leading to increased efficiency and productivity.With rapid technological advancements, IT consulting is essential. It helps businesses adopt new technologies that can streamline operations and improve service delivery." (University Staff no. 4, October 2024)

Another participant was of the view that:

"Human resources consulting have been instrumental in helping organizations develop better hiring practices and employee engagement strategies, which are vital for growth. The leadership consulting services are great for nurturing future leaders within our community, focusing on developing skills that drive effective team management. Environmental consulting is crucial, especially with the current focus on sustainability. It guides organizations in implementing eco-friendly practices that benefit both the community and the

41

environment." (University Staff no. 1, October 2024).

Contributing on the same point another participant added that:

Innovation consulting is exciting because it encourages businesses to think outside the box and adopt cutting-edge solutions that can enhance their services and products. The strategy consulting services have helped local organizations develop clear, actionable plans for growth and sustainability, ensuring they align with community needs. E-commerce consulting has opened new avenues for local businesses, enabling them to tap into online markets and reach customers beyond their immediate geography." (University Staff no. 18, October 2024)

Another participant contributed that:

Through governance consulting, local governments are better equipped to enhance their policies and procedures, leading to improved public trust and engagement in community affairs. Marketing consulting services have empowered local businesses to create tailored marketing strategies, helping them effectively communicate their value propositions to target audiences. The management consulting services focus on optimizing operations within local organizations, providing them with tools to increase efficiency and reduce costs. IT consulting is essential for community organizations looking to modernize their operations. It provides insights into the latest technology trends that can boost their effectiveness. (University Staff no. 33, October 2024)

Another participant was of the view that:

"With human resources consulting, local businesses gain expertise in talent acquisition and employee retention strategies, which are crucial for building a committed workforce. Leadership consulting fosters the development of strong leaders within the community, equipping them with the skills needed to guide organizations through challenges and changes. Environmental consulting services are vital for promoting sustainable practices within the community, guiding organizations on how to

minimize their ecological footprints. Innovation consulting inspires local businesses to embrace creativity and implement innovative solutions, ensuring they remain competitive in a rapidly evolving market." (University Staff no. 22, October 2024)

The extracts above have disclosed that the consulting services offered through university community engagement impacted positively. The extracts indicates that the consulting services offered were invaluable one as they contributed to changes in terms of the performance of various actors and practitioners in the community.

4.5 The Challenges Associated with University Community Engagement

Despite the perceived benefits, **89%** (33 out of 37) participants identified several challenges associated with university-community engagements aimed at sustainable development. These challenges included resources allocation, difficulties in quantifying the value of consulting services, limited staff engagement with the community, and bureaucratic hurdles that hindered effective coordination. Meanwhile, **11%** (4 participants) were unaware of these issues. One of the participants expressed as follows:

"While some university-community engagements can be easily quantified, we must acknowledge that many others, particularly those requiring social capital and technical expertise, are more challenging to measure. It's essential to develop metrics that can capture the impact of these qualitative aspects." (University Staff no. 36, October 2024)

Contributing on the same issues of the challenges another participant argued that:

"It's disheartening to see that university-community engagements in Tanzania are often weak. Despite having the knowledge and innovative solutions, universities fail to disseminate this information effectively within the community. Consulting services play a pivotal role in establishing strong engagements with the community. These services should not only focus on academic knowledge but also on practical skills that can directly address community needs." (University Staff no. 9, October 2024)

Another participant argued as follows:

"There's a pressing need for universities to shift their focus from purely academic pursuits to addressing pressing societal issues. Engaging with the community is essential for universities to remain relevant. The primary goal of university-community engagements should be to enhance socio-economic development. Universities must move beyond their academic confines and actively engage with the community to tackle real-world issues" (University Staff no. 11, October 2024).

Another participant added as follows:

"One of the biggest challenges we face is resource allocation. While we have great intentions, the lack of funding often hampers our ability to implement our community engagement initiatives fully. I've noticed that when community members are involved in the decision-making process, our projects gain more traction. Their insights are invaluable in creating sustainable solutions."

These extracts above capture diverse insights and reflect the various challenges and opportunities related to university-community engagements. They indicate a need to improve our capacity for community engagement including establishing clear strategies for knowledge exchange. This involves creating platforms for dialogue, workshops, and collaborative projects that can strengthen these engagements. Apart from that the extract show the need to critically assess the types of skills required for effective university-community engagement.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Consulting Services Offered by the University to the Community

The discussion is based on the findings of the study. The study revealed that the consulting services that are offered by the university included strategy consulting, e-commerce consulting, governance consulting, marketing consulting, management consulting, information technology consulting, human resources consulting, leadership consulting, environmental consulting, innovation consulting, public relations consulting, and business process consulting. This finding is in line with Spanu, Ulmeanu,

&Doicin (2024) who argued that by engaging with communities, universities can connect with external stakeholders, generate social impact, and enhance public engagement strategies. This implies that building trust with community leaders has been essential for social-economic development. Engagement with the community support has facilitated smoother project implementations and fostered a sense of shared responsibility among community members. It is important for us to document and evaluate our impact regularly. Many of successes go unnoticed, and sharing these findings can help advocate for more resources and support from the university. Apart from that community feedback is crucial. Universities need to conduct regular surveys to ensure that they are meeting their expectations, which not only improve their services but also build a sense of ownership among community members. Thus, involving universities in community projects has been beneficial for both sides. Universities gain practical experience, and communities benefit from fresh perspectives and innovative ideas, leading to stronger ties.

5.2 The Impacts of University Community Engagement

In terms of impact, **95%** (35 out of 37) participants reported that the consulting services have positively influenced the community, contributing to development across various sectors. This implies that, the university's engagement with the community has allowed us to better understand community needs. Universities need to tailor our consulting services to be more relevant, resulting in positive impacts on local development.This finding is in line with Bowden and Marton (1998) who argued that universities are now compelled to engage more directly with their surrounding communities through consulting services, reinforcing the need for impactful and sustainable engagement. Arguably, the consulting initiatives need to foster a sense of ownership within the community. When community members are actively involved, they are more likely to support and sustain the projects we initiate.The collaboration between the university and the community open up new avenues for knowledge transfer. University staff learns from the community, and they benefit from their expertise, creating a mutually beneficial relationship. The university's policies on community engagement make a significant difference. They guide community approach and help ensure that our efforts are aligned with

sustainable development goals. For instance, education awareness campaigns have led to increased knowledge about preventative measures, which has improved overall health outcomes among the communities in Tanzania. Apart from that the relationship university has built with community leaders has been instrumental. Their support helps us gain trust and fosters collaboration, making their initiatives more effective.

5.3 The Challenges Associated with University Community Engagement

Despite the perceived benefits, **89%** (33 out of 37) participants identified several challenges associated with university-community engagements aimed at sustainable development. These challenges included difficulties in quantifying the value of consulting services, limited staff engagement with the community, and bureaucratic hurdles that hindered effective coordination. This implies that it is essential that the university continuously engage in feedback loops with the community. Community input not only improves our services but also empowers them to take an active role in their development. The finding is in line with Kuhsen (1978) and Togo (2009) who disclosed that many universities historically focused on knowledge creation and dissemination for elite social strata, often perceived as "ivory towers" disconnected from community issues the impact of university consulting services is often underreported. More comprehensive evaluations could help the university to demonstrate our contributions to community development and advocate for more support. While university initiatives are well-intended, there are still challenges, such as limited resources and community awareness. Addressing these barriers is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of our engagement. Despite universities' potential to act as catalysts for sustainable development through consulting services and community engagement, many institutions in Tanzania still operate within traditional frameworks that prioritize academic excellence over social responsibility. This has led to mismatch between universities and local communities, with little evidence of systematic strategies to address community needs or assess the sustainability of their contributions.

Furthermore, while some studies have explored university engagement in global contexts, there is a lack of empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of university-community

partnerships in Tanzania. This gap presents an opportunity for further research to explore how Tanzanian universities can effectively leverage their resources and expertise to build meaningful connections with local communities, thereby enhancing both academic and societal outcomes. Addressing this gap could contribute significantly to understanding the role of higher education in promoting consulting activities in Tanzania. Despite great efforts by universities on improving consulting services there is scanty information on their quality, relevance and impact for sustainable community development. Currently, it is difficult to discern the significance and contributions of the consulting services in universities to the community because of various issues related to quality and relevance. Therefore, enhancing consulting services in universities for sustainable community development is essential in order to find out what went wrong to the extent of having the current products of the services that cannot cope up with the needs of the community.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

It is high time for universities in collaboration with private sectors to reflect on the consulting services they offer to the community if they really intend to meet the needs of diverse population which is faced with numerous challenges. The major challenge lies on the critical change agents and system players as it not known whether they know how to interpret the demands of the diverse population and translate them into consulting services for sustainable community development. It should be agreed from the outset that enhancing consulting services in universities is ongoing process but the current challenges facing communities have prompted the need the question the role of each agent and service providers in the society. To address the challenges, the study recommends that the university prioritize the quantification of consulting services to enhance accountability and impact measurement. Additionally, it suggests providing more training to staff on the importance and practices of university-community engagements and reducing bureaucracy to streamline the consulting processes.

DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

Author(s) hereby declare that generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models,

etc. have been used during the writing or editing of manuscripts. This explanation will include the name, version, model, and source of the generative AI technology and as well as all input prompts provided to the generative AI technology.

Details of the AI usage are given below:

I used ChatGPT to assist me in refining some few sections. However, I did not save the prompts.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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