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Developing small town Uganda: diverse aspirations, capabilities and lived experiences of residents

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Abstract

This study examines the experiences of residents in seven small but rapidly growing towns in Uganda, an understudied scale of urbanisation in Sub-Saharan Africa. Drawing on extensive household survey and focus group data, we apply the aspirations–capabilities framework to explore how diverse residents navigated the contexts, with differentiated outcomes. Experiences of urban change are not homogeneous. Residents who had moved to the towns from rural areas sought employment but tended to remain in precarious circumstances. Urban-origin in-migrants were more educated and female and sought a better-quality life and they were reaping more benefit from town developments. Lifelong residents shared some of the challenges of rural migrants but could also engage their networks and home ownership and land ownership to benefit from how urban Uganda has been developing. Local discourses around urban growth and in-migration were more positive than official control narratives in the country have been. Residents portrayed in-migration as bringing new ideas, jobs, and an increase in urban services and facilities. Yet residents also noted that growth in population did not always equate to improved quality, with concerns about privatisation limiting inclusivity. Policy implications stress the need to move beyond a numbers-focused approach to urban growth. Insights are relevant not only for Uganda but also for other fast-growing African towns facing similar challenges in how to support an inclusive development.

Science highlights

- Small towns view in-migration as positive but emphasise quality important for inclusive development.
- 30% in-migrants were from other urban areas & these did better and felt included in development.
- 60% in-migrants to small towns from nearby rural areas - many remain in a life of struggle.
- 1-in-3 urban-origin migrants had moved away from the capital city.
- Urban-origin have life quality improvement aspirations, rural-origin have work-hopes aspirations.



Policy and practice recommendations

- Urban development policy should focus on internal movers & see opportunities, rather than cross-border & control narratives.
- Internal urban migrants are a developmental resource that towns could harness not restrict.
- Incentivise job creation & proactively plan services for a growing population, with migrants seen as a resource.
- Privatisation of infrastructure, health, education benefits the better-off – support inclusivity & affordability.
- Support better *quality/professionalism* of infrastructure/services, not just quantity increase.

Keywords Small towns, Urban growth, Inclusive development, Uganda, Migration

This paper explores the daily lives, experiences and perceptions of residents of seven Ugandan small towns that have been experiencing fast growth and transformation over at least the past decade. We explore whether there was broad similarity or differentiation in who was benefiting (or not) from development and examine possible influences and implications. The article is one in a wider study of the inclusivity of urban development (see (Andersson et al. 2025; Mackay et al. 2025; Vargas Falla et al. 2025) for sister papers). In contrast to much urban development literature focused on large cities (populations over 500,000 and sometimes into millions) we focus on a smaller urban scale (see methodology for more detail on town selection).

It should be noted that there is no shared definition identifying a ‘small’ town, and the concept varies by context (in China for example small can designate a settlement of 200,000). As other researchers such as Andreassen, Agergaard and colleagues (2017) have noted, the concept is not so much about fixing a population size but also considers the role of the urban settlement in relation to the size and functionality of other towns and cities within the country. In our work we thus considered the Ugandan urban context, as well as the United Cities and Local Governments report on the urban future which defined small towns as around 50,000 population (UCLG 2016). Our studied towns all fall under official Ugandan classifications of ‘Town Council’ or ‘Municipality’ with a ‘Town Board’, ‘Ward’, ‘Parish’ as well as ‘Village’ being lower down the urban hierarchy (see Mackay et al. (2025) for a diagram of Ugandan urban nomenclature). Some of the study towns had a long history of being considered ‘urban’, while others had, until recently, been framed as rural.

Why look at residents’ experiences of urban change at this scale? Often such towns offer reasonably pleasant conditions when contrasted to large cities (in terms of not yet experiencing massive traffic jams and air pollution nor extensive sprawl), and they may be able to learn from the successes and failures of their larger siblings. They are an understudied context (Agergaard et al. 2021) that moreover may offer new insights into how to plan for an urban growth and development that is inclusive. In addition, urban growth projections within Sub-Saharan Africa generally indicate that the largest population growth is anticipated in this scale of town (Agergaard et al. 2021). Another reason why studies at this urban scale in an African context are of interest is the wealth of evidence that much African urban growth has been without the accompaniment of industrial development and formal employment creation (Cobbinah et al. 2015; Turok and McGranahan 2013).

By inclusive urban development we mean socio-economic, political, cultural and infrastructural change (development) that benefits as many people in society as possible, regardless of age, gender, elite connections, background, nationality, or wealth status, refer to Gupta *et al.* (2015) for further discussion of inclusive development. An inclusive developmental progress would strive to provide all people in that context with access to health care, urban infrastructure and services, quality education and decent work possibilities and thus is broader than a focus on growth in the financial economy (*ibid.*). It is about non-discriminatory improvement.

In considering growing towns, this paper inevitably links to debates around migration. Although people moving into a place, in-migration, is not the sole reason for urban growth (in-situ natural birth rate increase is a major cause, as is the often overlooked reclassification of previously 'rural' settlements as 'urban') migration is a factor contributing to urban transformation (Cobbinah *et al.* 2015). Yet movement to small towns remains less studied in comparison to larger cities (Selod and Shilpi 2021; Tacoli *et al.* 2015). While small towns host diverse kinds of migrants, the patterns of their origins, and their role in town development, as well as the migrant experience in the small town destination itself, are not well documented (Andreasen *et al.* 2017; Christiaensen and Lozano-Gracia, 2024). Moreover, the role played by migrants in contributing to the development of small towns may differ from those in larger cities which have more established infrastructure and economies of scale (Christiaensen and Lozano-Gracia 2024).

The paper conducts a comparative analysis of the experiences, aspirations and capabilities of diverse residents of fast-transforming Ugandan towns. The specific research questions structuring the paper are:

- 1) What resident patterns and characteristics (including where in-migrants had moved from) are shaping these fast-growing small towns?
- 2) How do resident circumstances and experiences within the towns compare, based on origin (rural, urban, or the town itself)?
- 3) What does application of the aspirations and capabilities framework to the data for lifelong residents and residents with a migration background reveal for efforts to support a more inclusive growth and development for smaller towns in Uganda?

The manuscript that follows first outlines the Ugandan context and describes some of the recent discourse around urban growth and development. The paper then outlines the aspirations and capability theory framework, before describing our mixed methods approach. The findings on the patterns, experiences and narratives around daily life and in-migration within the context of these small but fast developing Ugandan towns are then presented. We further filter our data through the theory lens, providing deeper contextual understanding of residents' experiences. The paper closes by highlighting important implications for policy and practice around fast-urbanising small towns in Uganda.

Ugandan urban development narratives

As already noted, urban areas of Africa are growing quickly (especially small and secondary towns) and yet urban life within SSA is not always living up to the promised ideal in peoples' minds of reducing poverty and providing a more stable and secure livelihood

(Awumbila 2015). Governments and regions need to design their urban planning and development strategies with consideration to migration (Rugunanan 2022), yet the narrative too often centres on the need for control and to hinder in-migration as exemplified in this quote from a UN Expert Group meeting held in New York in 2022:

there are numerous future projections that Africa will become increasingly fast-growing, with estimations that the current population will double by 2050 and resettle in African urban areas. This growth will continue with increasing migration trends accelerating the urbanization process. However, opportunities and challenges linked to this growth will be dependent on high levels of control and management (Rugunanan 2022, p. 4).

Uganda has a history of population movement to the towns and cities: both inflows of international migrants prompted by economic and political uncertainties or conflict in neighbouring countries, as well as of internal migrants either fleeing conflict in the north of the country, or simply moving in the hope of finding employment or to join family members (not to mention temporary migrations) (Mulumba and Olema 2009; Tumwesigye et al. 2021). However, despite these movements of people the data and reports that shape Ugandan migration and urban development policy agendas and practical responses have largely focused on international migrants (IOM and Habitat 2021; Mulumba and Olema 2009). This manuscript, in investigating the experiences of small town residents (including in-migrants), also contributes to filling knowledge gaps on domestic migration motivations and implications (Selod and Shilpi 2021).

As a recent book published by the African Development Forum notes ‘In a rapidly urbanizing world, local governments often perceive migrants as a burden’ (Christiaensen and Lozano-Gracia 2024, p. xvii). Indeed, Uganda lacks a clear migration policy within its approach to urban growth. For example, the country’s most recent future urban vision—Uganda Vision 2040—mentions migration in one sentence only, and as something to be controlled (GoU 2013). Specific to the arena of urban development, Vision 2040 emphasises the government’s desire to ‘control urban sprawling through legislation, integrated physical planning and strict development control and increasing density of settlement’ (GoU 2013, p. 82). Even the most recent National Urban Policy from 2017 frames urban growth principally as a problem to be managed/restrained rather than harnessed, yet this policy makes not a single mention of ‘migrants’ despite migration being a contributor to urban growth (MLHUD 2017). It is important to recognise, however, that despite national visions and rhetoric, the practical everyday response to in-migration and a growing urban population falls to the local governments themselves. Yet, since most towns and cities in Uganda are reliant on the central government their funding, despite decentralisation (EALGA 2012), towns (and smaller towns more so) have limited financial as well as organisational capacity to proactively engage with and plan for the rapid growth in residents (Awumbila 2015).

There is evidence, however, of a shift towards recognising that migrants to towns and cities can be better leveraged for developmental benefits and should thus be seen as a resource to harness, rather than a problem to purge, see for example *Migrants, Markets and Mayors* by Christiaensen & Lozano-Gracia (2024). This recent publication talks about the ‘Mayor’s Wedge’, referring to the ability of city Mayors to utilise their policy platforms (such as the Uganda Local Government Association [ULGA], the Urban

Authorities Association of Uganda [UAAU] or Local Government Finance Commission [LGFC]), and their town resources and partnership possibilities to better leverage migrants and town growth to benefit all residents:

The key to ensuring migrant integration into the socioeconomic fiber of cities lies in good urban management, which prepares for growth and benefits all citizens regardless of their migrant status. Absorbing migrants into a city is part of the larger issue of how well municipalities manage the delivery of services for an expanding... (Christiaensen and Lozano-Gracia 2024, p. 157).

Our paper explores the patterns and experiences of residents in our seven fast-changing towns, including in-migrants, with an interest in how to support an inclusive urban development. The next section describes the theory framework we engage.

Theory: aspirations and capabilities framework

Though our study is broader than investigating migration, being interested in inclusion (or exclusion) in urban development, we use a theory framework from migration studies: the aspirations and capabilities framework, with its interest in people's hopes and abilities within structural limits. The framing is also relevant to people who have not migrated, as much as to migrants (as Haas himself states). This section provides a brief contextualisation of this framework. Since the late 19th century, various theories have emerged in social science disciplines aimed at understanding the processes that drive population growth and migration. Consider, for example, the gravity model applied to human movement by Carey (1895) or Ravenstein (1889), or Stouffer's (1940) consideration of distance and intervening opportunities, or Wallerstein's postulation of flows of people in relation to a hierarchy of world systems in the 1970s (Wallerstein 2010). Hein de Haas, however, has been vocal about the limitations of much previous theorising around migration and indeed has claimed that the study of migration has experienced 'theoretical regression rather than progress' (Haas 2021). He asserts, building on Massey and colleagues' earlier critiques, that migration theories have remained stuck in the past or been hamstrung by fears of 'grand theory'. His essential argument is that most theorising around migration has failed to adequately consider the influence of both agency and structure together, or has focused around simplistic push-pull explanations. In response to these criticisms and building on Amartya Sen's influential work on capability and 'development' as freedom, de Haas proposes an 'aspirations and capabilities framework' for analysing peoples' decisions to move or to remain in place (Haas 2021). His intention was to bridge traditionally common divisions between the neo-classical equilibrium perspective, functionalist and historical-structuralist social theorising around mobility, accounting for people's agency and ability to exercise choice, albeit within structures of constraints (and opportunities) (ibid.). His framework and arguments emphasise that people are rarely without any agency whatsoever (except, he notes, in cases of forced slavery or deportation), neither are they subject only to rational economic decision-making. People make decisions to move, or to stay, within sets of influences and informed by perceptions and interpretations (ibid.). It is important to note that de Haas describes his aim as not to provide a single all-encompassing theory, and his intention is that the framework should be further refined. He cautions against the risk of theories becoming 'intellectual strait jackets' (Haas 2021, p. 12) and instead insists that they should be

useful conceptual tools. Haas suggests that the ‘systematic distinction between the ability (or capability) and the aspiration to migrate (or remain in a place) allows for richer, nuanced and more realistic categorisations’ (ibid.). Haas notes that:

Neither functionalist nor historical-structural theories provide realistic accounts of migratory agency. The central challenge in advancing migration theory is therefore the elaboration of conceptual tools that improve our ability to simultaneously account for structure and agency in understanding processes and experiences of migration, without discarding the important insights which both functionalist and historical-structural paradigms offer and thus rejecting them altogether. (Haas 2021, pp. 8–9)

The aspirations and capabilities framework (Fig. 1) thus incorporates how people’s goals and aspirations for life, together with the resources and capabilities they have to move (or stay), filtered by their perceptions of geographical opportunities and the concept of ‘a good life,’ aided by positive or negative liberties (aspects of societal structures) all interact to shape a person’s ability and willingness to migrate or not. Positive liberty refers to the *freedom to* act such as having facilitating resources, while negative liberty refers to the *freedom from* restrictions such as the freedom from prohibitive migration policies, or from visa restrictions.

In analysing the structural influences of the liberties in the framework Haas provides a table theorising possible migrant categories based on varying degrees of liberty (see Fig. 2): precarious, distress, improvement and free migrants. Here the kinds of rural-to-urban near distance migration to small towns, such as those we have studied, are classified as being a ‘**Precarious Migration**’ characterised by low positive liberty (freedom to) and low negative liberty (free from constraints).

Our small Uganda towns are simultaneously sites of emplacedness (lifelong residents) as well as both precarious migration and improvement migration, at the least. In this paper we analyse our qualitative and quantitative data through the lens of de Haas’s framework to explore the patterns, motivations and lives of diverse resident in these small but fast-growing towns of Uganda.

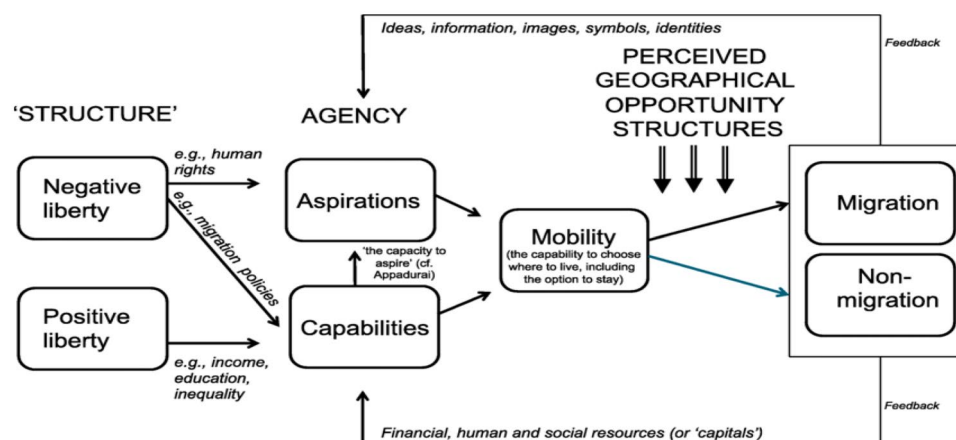


Fig. 1 The aspirations-capabilities framework for analysing the interplay of structure and agency in influencing people's mobility strategies. Source: Haas (2021, p. 25), published under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as the original author(s) and the source are credited. Licence: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

		Positive liberty (‘freedom to’; capabilities)	
		Low	High
Negative liberty (‘freedom from’; external constraints)	Low	Precarious migration Generally short-distance, often internal, by relatively poor or impoverished i.e. poor rural-to-urban migrants, internal displaced	Distress migration Deprivation of mobility freedom through absence of reasonable option to stay; applies to refugees fleeing potentially life-threatening conditions but possessing the resources to move abroad and obtain legal status
	High	Improvement migration Internal and international, often through networks, recruitment and pooling of family resources	‘Free migration’ Relatively unconstrained mobility in and between wealth countries or by wealthy people, skilled workers, ‘lifestyle’ migrants

Fig. 2 Theorising of migrant categories based on levels of liberty. Source: Edited from Haas (2021, p. 27); published under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as the original author(s) and the source are credited. Licence: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Methodology

The paper draws from a household survey conducted August–December 2022 across the seven towns and focus group discussions (FGD) with residents (migrants and non-migrants) conducted August–September 2023. The study was conducted in Tanzania and Uganda, but this manuscript focuses only on Uganda. More detailed description of the overall research design, survey sampling strategy, the household questionnaire, and the FGD interview guide has been published in Mackay et al. (2025) for the interested reader. In this section, however, we provide a synopsis of the methodology to provide an understanding of the data upon which the manuscript’s analysis was built.

Country selection

The countries (Tanzania and Uganda (with this paper focusing on Uganda) were purposively selected to represent late to urbanise, and fast urbanising, Sub-Saharan African countries (Fox and Goodfellow 2022). They are also countries with many small/intermediate towns that are growing rapidly: a trend predicted to continue (Cobbinah et al. 2015; Satterthwaite 2016). Indeed, recent data from the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development showed that of the 625 urban centres in Uganda, 93% fit within the classification of ‘small’ (MLHUD 2022). Finally, in these countries, much of the population still rely on agriculture for food and livelihoods (68% in Uganda (ITA 2023), despite urbanizing trends, and where informality is normality (Cobbinah et al. 2015).

Selection of growing small towns

The towns were selected by analysing increase in night-time light (NTL) data (Elvidge et al. 2021) between 2012 and 2020 and observation of town boundary expansion and densification from analysis of historic timeline satellite imagery in Google Earth. A change in the night-time light intensity over time has been shown to be an indicator of economic growth (Mellander et al. 2015).

An NTL change layer was intersected with Africapolis 2015 population data in a Geographic Information System (GIS) to create polygons showing potential sites. After

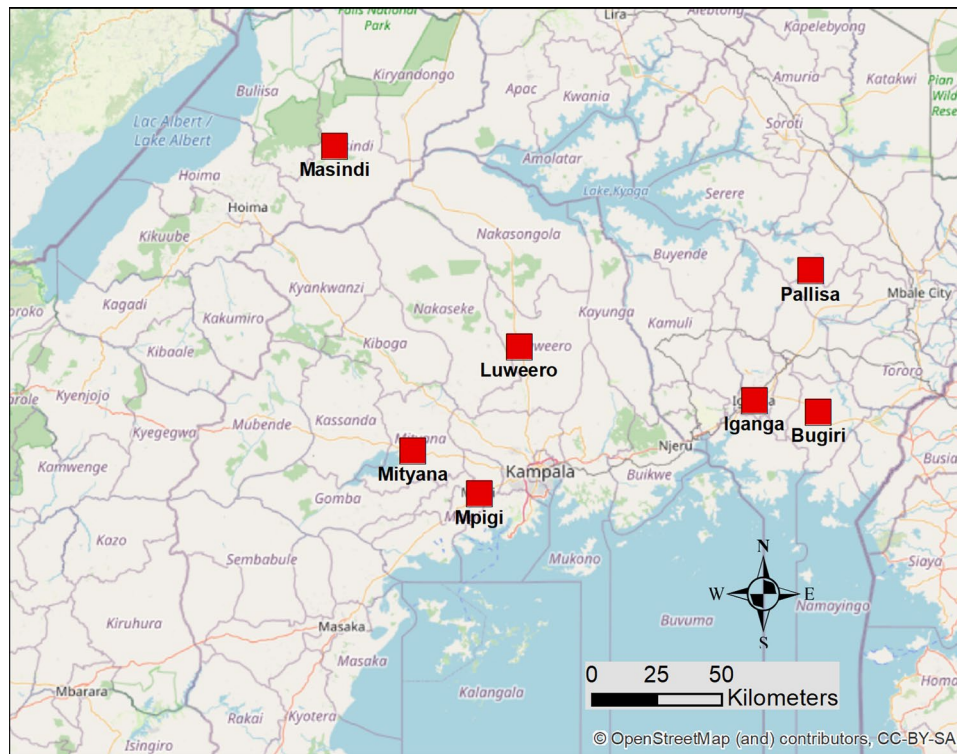


Fig. 3 Map of Uganda showing the location of the seven study towns

a series of tests, we ran the intersect using a population range of 30,000–300,000 to account for the rural hinterland included in the administrative boundaries of the Afri-capolis data. Sites were later cross-checked with shapefiles containing census population data. This allowed us to find sites with a 6–20km² spatial extent and a contiguous built-up area population range of 13,000–60,000 which we determined sufficiently selected for ‘small towns’ using our knowledge of Ugandan urban hierarchies and areal spread. We then screened these hundreds of potential sites by drawing a radius of 300 km radius from Kampala due to the time, cost and safety constraints in deploying the team. This gave a longlist of 50 potential sites which were further analysed in Google Earth historic timeline satellite imagery to identify towns that had expanded or densified over time and exclude sites that were obviously not towns (such as industrial sites, university or church complexes, military infrastructure).

With such a process, and using the team’s contextual knowledge, we then selected the seven study towns. All towns had the desired population range in the core urban settlement and demonstrated signs of economic growth (NTL increase) and physical expansion/densification since 2012. Further details of town characteristics and our initial hypothesising regarding drivers of growth are published in Mackay et al. (2025). The distribution of the selected towns of Masindi, Pallisa, Iganga, Bugiri, Luweero, Mityana and Mpigi is shown in Fig. 3.

Survey questionnaire

This questionnaire was deployed by random systematic sampling across neighbourhoods within the town choosing every forth household from a random start point. The town neighbourhoods to survey were selected randomly using the list of neighbourhood

names from census data and the random number function in Excel. Names were then sorted in that number order and, if all neighbourhoods could not be sampled from, then the first 40% of neighbourhoods were selected. Each town had great variation in the number and size of their neighbourhoods. In some towns we thus surveyed from all urban neighbourhoods. We did not purposefully select neighbourhoods. We were not looking for the poorest neighbourhoods, nor the best-off neighbourhoods. We instead intended the selection to be random hoping thereby to be able to gather a general picture of residents' circumstances.

The survey covered six areas: (1) Household Structure, Housing and Infrastructural Services; (2) Expenditures and Assets; (3) Rural-Urban Linkages and Social Networks; (4) Socio-economic situation; (5) Work situation; and (6) Local Governance, Voice and Participation. The first three sections consider the entire household while the last three relate to the individual respondent's circumstances. The resulting dataset contained 300 variables, with 1789 respondents across the towns (minimum of 250 households per town). We use 'town origin' if a person was born and brought up in town and had never left. Any other 'origin' refers to their location prior to moving to the town surveyed. Our interest in this paper was where those who had moved to the towns had moved from, and why, and how life was for them. This study is not analysing individuals' migration histories. Table 1 provides a description of our survey dataset, split by origin as per these definitions.

Due to reasons of team safety and practicality we could only survey during daytime hours. This meant a greater proportion of female respondents since more women tend to be around the home during the day. We did also survey on Saturdays and Sundays whenever possible when more men were at home. Nevertheless, as Table 1 shows, there were more female respondents.

To account for this over-representation of females in the survey and allow our data to be representative of each town, we used the census gender ratios at the neighbourhood

Table 1 Respondent characteristics

Socio-economic attribute	Proportion (%) of the Origin Group			
	Rural Origin N = 768	Urban Origin N = 379	International Origin N = 110	Town Origin N = 502
Gender of Respondent - Female	81*+	83*+	84	67*-
Gender of Respondent - Male	19*-	17*-	16	33*+
Gender of the HH head - Female	26	30	29	27
Gender of the HH head - Male	74	70	71	73
Age – Young (18–35 years)	53	66*+	61	50*-
Age – Mid (36–65 years)	43*+	31*-	29	43
Age – Elderly (> 65 years)	4	3	10*+	8*+
Marital Status - Single	33*-	40	37	44*+
Marital Status - Partnered	67*+	60	63	56*-
Education Level - None	9	4	13	10
Education Level - Primary	35	23	33	33
Education Level - Secondary	42	50*+	38	40
Education Level - Tertiary, Vocational	10	15*+	14	10
Education Level - Tertiary, Academic	5*-	8	1*-	7
Migrant – Recent (< 5 years)	38*+	51*+	38	n/a
Migrant - Longer Term (> 6 years)	62*+	49*+	62*+	n/a

Notes: * indicates a statistically significant relationship, and + indicates the attribute is overrepresented in that origin group compared to expected, while - indicates the attribute was less represented in that origin group than would be expected, using chi-squared analysis

Table 2 Origin of small-town survey respondents

	Number	Percent of Survey (%)
Migrant, International	110	6
Migrant, National Rural	757	42
Migrant, National Urban	379	21
Town Origin	502	28
Total	1748	98
No Data on Origin	41	2
	1789	100

level to calculate a weighting that could be applied or removed in SPSS during analysis as appropriate to the test being performed. The weighting process accounted statistically for three factors: (i) the probability of a neighbourhood being sampled (ratio of sampled neighbourhood to total number of urban built-up area neighbourhoods); (ii) the population size of sampled areas relative to the population of all neighbourhoods; and (iii) the gender ratio in each town. We are thus able to run tests and analysis with weights on or off. Having this weighting allows more accurate comparison across the towns and balances the gender dynamics. For the analyses in this paper, however, we found that applying the weights did not significantly change the overall pattern of findings. Thus, we chose to show the unweighted data as this corresponds with the actual number of respondents, feeling this is easier for the reader to understand.

In addition to weighting to balance gender in the survey data, we actively gathered male perspectives during the focus group discussions and had some male-only FGDs in each town.

Table 2 shows the origin of surveyed residents in terms of being a lifelong resident (just 28% of those surveyed, in line with these being selected as rapidly growing towns) or if they were in-migrants, which type of area they had moved to the town from. Rural origin in-movers formed 42% of the residents of the towns while a further 21% had moved to these destinations from another urban area. International migrants formed a minor proportion of small town residents: just 110 survey respondents out of the total 1,789 were of an international (non-Ugandan) origin (Table 2). While this amounts to 6% of residents (see Table 4), this was higher than the equivalent figure from our Tanzanian survey where just 1% had an international origin.

Focus group discussions

Qualitative data were gathered via 54 focus group discussions with various residents. These were attended by circa six people and were with eight types of residents: male, female, female-headed households (FHH), migrants, youth, the elderly, people locally classed as the poorest, and people with disabilities (PWD). We recognise that no person fits just one category and there is overlap (intersectionality as Kimberle Crenshaw championed (Cho et al. 2013): a female-head may also be a migrant, young and have a disability, for example). Our groupings are not intended to essentialise classifications but were a necessity to create a strategy for data collection and analysis. There was no cross-over among the groups, that is, no one person participated in more than one focus group.

A local contact used town registers to invite people to join. This was the most practical approach but it did mean that the contact had an influence on who was invited to which group. An interview guide asked about their life experience in town, ways of making a

Table 3 Description of FGD participants

Age Bracket (number of people)			Average age	Origin of Participant (number of people)	Average Years Lived in Town	
Young (18–35 years)	Mid-Age (36–65 years)	Elderly (> 65 years)	Years (available data)	Migrants	Town Origin	Years
112	151	34	38	147	150	22 (all participants)

Table 4 Focus group participant classifications

	FHH	Youth	Elderly	PWD	Poorest	Women	Migrants	Men	Sex Workers	TOTAL
Number of people	39	40	38	33	31	39	26	36	15*	297

* Of note is that the total number of sex workers that participated in our FGDs were actually 21 because 6 of the migrants were also sex workers in addition to the 15, we interviewed specifically as sex workers

living, their perceptions and experience of migration and of urban facilities, and their involvement in decision making.

Two research assistants conducted the FGDs. Assistants received a half-day of training before fieldwork and capacity-building throughout to ensure a common understanding. FGDs were documented with a reflective summary. Data was not collected on the identities of the respondents. The discussion was not recorded, and verbatim transcripts were not produced, only the summary which contained key points, researchers' reflections, observations, and highlighted points of agreement or disagreement.

Table 3 gives an overview of FGD participants, where 112 were young adults, and 34 were elderly. The average age of our participants was 38 years. Of the 147 participants who identified themselves as migrants, 41 (28%) were recent migrants (5-years or less) while 106 (72%) were long-term (> 6 years) migrants. From the 265 small town residents participating in the FGDs who gave information on what they did for a living 82 people (31%) said they farmed, either as a full-time livelihood (59 people) or together with another occupation (29 people). A similar proportion (72 people [27%]) were involved in informal trading/hawking or sold goods on street stalls and market stalls. All these occupations were informal and provided quite vulnerable livelihoods. Table 4 summarises the totals attending each type of resident group (ranging from 26 to 40). It should be noted that sex workers were not a focus of our study—we opportunistically undertook two additional FGDs with sex workers in Iganga and Bugiri when it became apparent that this was a significant livelihood strategy in these towns and after observing that all the international-origin migrants in one FGD were all also sex workers.

Analysing across the focus group classifications (since an individual could be in the elderly FGD group but could also have had an international migrant or an urban migrant origin, for example) revealed further diversity. Ninety FGD participants had a rural origin (61%), 47 (32%) urban origin and just 10 (7%) with international origin, of the total 147 migrants engaged. Those 10 international migrants were from the region (Rwanda, Congo and South Sudan) and were living precarious lives selling on the streets, washing clothes, or engaging in bar or sex work, much like many precarious rural-origin migrants.

Data analysis

Survey data was analysed using descriptive statistics, cross tabulations or comparison of means in the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 25. NVivo Software supported thematic analysis of the FGD data, allowing filtration by origin status. The focus group data analysed were largely under the themes of daily life in the towns, urban services and infrastructure, as well as anything related to town growth, migration discourses and inclusion or exclusion. Maps were created in ArcMap 10.5.1 using survey responses.

Limitations

We explore less the origins and experiences of international migrants in this paper due to limited data. We acknowledge also that our data represents a snapshot in time and cannot offer longitudinal insights. After initial analysis of the towns revealed much greater degree of similarity than difference across all data types, we decided not to separate out findings by town but rather to present the overall findings against our research questions. For this reason, as well as lack of space and the risk of being repetitive or creating confusion, we do not contextualise individual towns further in this paper.

Findings

This section presents findings on various resident experiences of town life. Section “[Analysing the characteristics of town residents](#)” explores the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of migrants and life-long residents as well as where any in-migrants had moved from, why they had moved to these towns, and time lived in the towns. Section “[Comparing experiences of small-town life by origin](#)” then delves into the qualitative experiences of life in these towns, as well as their views of urban infrastructure and services. The final part explores the migration-related narratives, revealing a more positive perception than is sometimes leveraged nationally.

Analysing the characteristics of town residents

Who were the small-town residents

Comparing migrants to town-origin residents across gender, age bracket, marital status and educational achievement revealed interesting differences. Migrants were more female than town origin residents, fitting with traditions where women move to marry or after marriage (Table 1). Migrants were more represented in the young age bracket than town-origin residents (Table 1). Of interest is that the urban origin migrants seemed to consist of more females, and more educated people than the rural migrants and town group (Table 1). The urban origin migrants, as noted earlier, may be part of a more recent phenomenon where 51% of urban-origin residents had moved within the previous 5-years, compared to 38% of the rural origin group.

Table 5 compares the means for quantitative variables. These data suggest that rural migrants had a greater poverty experience and fewest household and communicative assets than urban migrants or lifelong residents (Table 5). The urban migrants had the smallest mean household size of 4 people, and fewest adult equivalents. In addition, urban migrants held the greatest mean number of assets, the highest phone asset score and the lowest Lived Poverty Index (LPI). Furthermore, urban origin migrants spent most on food and housing and received least remittances. Lifelong residents had

Table 5 Comparison of household socio-economic characteristics

Demographic, Expenditure and Asset Attributes	Value of the Mean per Variable			
	Rural Origin N = 757	Urban Origin N = 379	International Origin N = 110	Town Origin N = 502
Household Size	5.2	4.3	5.2	5.9
Number of Adult Equivalents	3.7	3.2	3.7	4.3
Number of assets (non-phone)	1.74	2.0	1.65	1.97
Score for phone assets (none, basic, smart or multiple types)	1.51	1.74	1.61	1.64
Lived Poverty Index Score (0 = no poverty, 4 = extreme poverty)	0.94	0.79	1.2	0.9
Estimates paid daily hours worked over the previous year	7.6	7.8	8.8	7.7
Amount spent on food per capita previous month Ugandan Shillings (UGX) (US\$)*	77,200 (\$21)	95,500 (\$26)	48,000 (\$13)	77,200 (\$21)
Amount spent on housing costs the previous month UGX (US\$)*	53,000 (\$14)	47,000 (\$13)	46,000 (\$12)	25,400 (\$7)
Amount cash received from abroad the previous year, for those who received remittances only UGX (US\$)*	124,000 (\$34) (N = 457)	92,000 (\$25) (N = 218)	200,000 (\$54) (N = 76)	232,000 (\$63) (N = 261)

Note: Statistical tests to compare the means across all groups (Post-hoc Games Howell ANOVA tests) showed statistically significant differences in means at the 0.05 confidence level for all variables and groups with the exception of the following where differences in means were not statistically significant: household size & adult equivalents between the international and rural origins groups; mean hours worked between urban and town origin; and for food expenses between rural and town; housing expenses between international and urban; and for remittances from abroad received by the international and this town

* Figures rounded to nearest whole using exchange rate as at 28 Feb 2025 on www.xe.com

Source: Survey data, all seven towns

larger household sizes and more adult equivalents (suggesting they are more likely living within extended family structures). Town natives spent the least on food and housing and received higher international remittances. These data further suggest that urban origin migrants have a more privileged status, and greater capabilities than rural migrants or lifelong town residents.

Geographic patterns in movement to small towns

Of survey respondents with a migrant background, 9% had moved across borders while a full 61% had moved from a Ugandan rural area, and 30% had moved from an urban area. Figure 4 maps the number and origin of the domestic migrants that were part of our survey. Apparent is that many (circa 80 per town) of the overall 757 rural origin migrants had moved from the near-lying rural districts, travelling generally less than 50 km. This fits with the classic rural-urban migration theories that Haas and many other studies describe as providing the major source for smaller town migrants. The urban origin migrants, however, shows a different spatial pattern: approximately one out of three urban migrants had moved from the Kampala Region i.e. they had moved away from the capital city area (GKMA on Fig. 4). The remainder had moved from other larger cities such as Mbale, Mbarara, Hoima, Jinja, with a few moving from other similar-sized towns. The three towns closest to Kampala had a greater proportion of migrants who had moved from the GKMA compared to more distant towns: Mpigi—most proximate, had 76% of its urban migrants from GKMA, Luweero (next proximate)—77%, then Mityana 46%. The remaining 4 towns had only 19–37% of their urban-origin migrants coming from the GKMA. There may be a Covid-related effect here pushing people out of the capital city as 31% of urban-origin migrants had moved within the preceding 2 years of survey in 2022 compared to just 19% of rural-origin migrants (see Discussion).

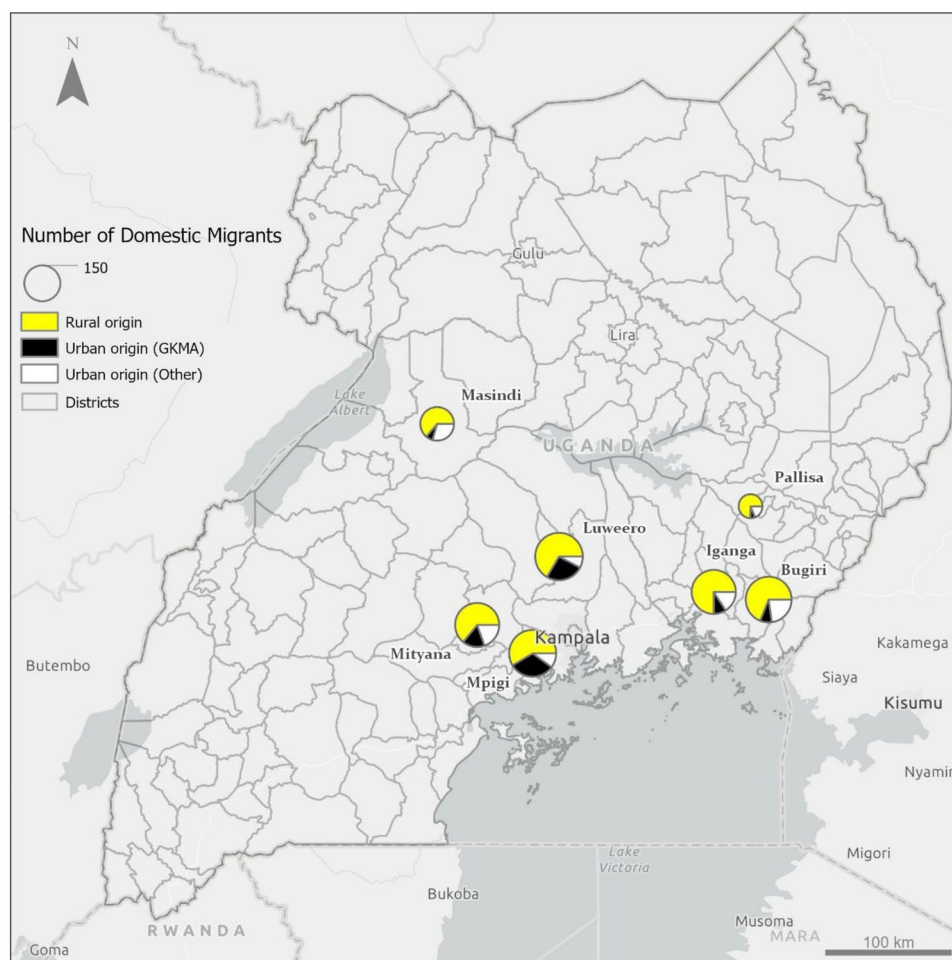


Fig. 4 Map indicating the number and origin of domestic migrants to each town. Note: GKMA stands for Greater Kampala Metropolitan Area. Source: Created by Cenk Demiroglu

Why move to these towns

The majority (62%) of men moved to find work (Fig. 5) and rural-origin men even more than urban-origin men (statistically significant, data not shown), while only 22% of female migrants had moved for this reason. More than half (53%) of women had moved to the town in relation to marriage, demonstrating clear gendered differences in motivation for small town migration. This tradition of women moving in relation to marriage, as well as the indication in Table 3 that Ugandan women comprise a larger proportion of domestic migrants than many international studies, are supported by other research (Mulumba and Olema 2009; Selod and Shilpi 2021). The IOM also noted that a greater proportion of Uganda's internal migrants are female (IOM, 2015), somewhat contrary to oft-published discourses around men on the move and young men in particular, for example: 'The UN Food and Agriculture Organization report informs us that most migrants are likely to be male and between 15 and 34 years of age' (reported in Rugunanan (2022, p. 3). Those who cited their move as due to high cost of living in a large city, or inability to make a livelihood in the previous place, were almost exclusively urban migrants (statistically significant, data not shown).

Close to 60% had lived with immediate close family (parents, children or spouse) when they first moved to town while around 30% rented a room (not with relatives) and circa

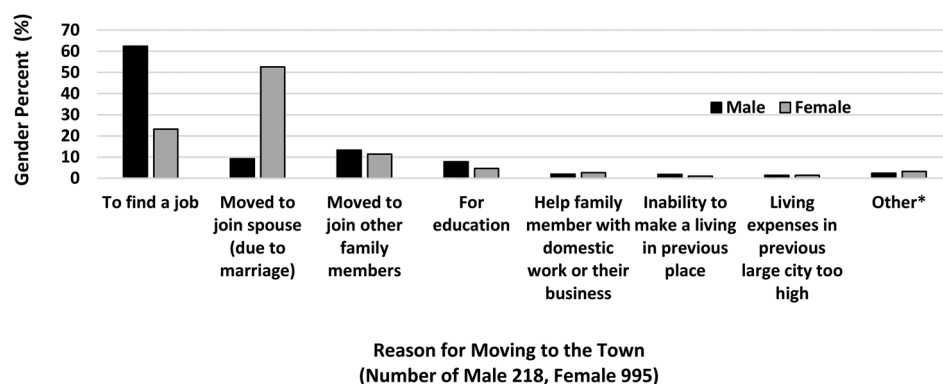


Fig. 5 Clear gendered difference in main reason for moving to town. NB: the relationship between gender and moving to find a job (more men) or moving to join spouse/get married (more women) was strongly statistically significant

8% lived with other relatives. This pattern was largely the same regardless of town, or of migrant origin, suggesting that existing familial ties play a role in destination choice for 70% of migrants.

Comparing experiences of small-town life by origin

This section is split into three parts: the first compares the qualitative experiences of residents' daily lives by origin (drawing from FGDs). The second part assesses migrant and town-origin inhabitants' experiences of urban services and infrastructure. Many studies have documented how migrants too often experience prejudiced or sub-standard services compared to locals (Harrison et al. 2005; Landau 2007; OHCHR, 2014). Yet such studies generally considered international migrants, with the exception of the recent study edited by Christiaensen and Lozano-Gracia (2024). We explore perspectives from all migrants. The third part assesses local narratives around migration, scrutinising claims regarding the role for, and consequences of, migration within urban development. Numerous studies have shown that national political narratives around migration and urbanisation tend to be negative (Section "[Ugandan urban development narratives](#)") and generally view migration as something to be discouraged, bringing urban sprawl, unsanitary conditions, competition for scarce jobs and resources, and exclusion (GoU 2013; King 2012). We, therefore, wished to explore the migration narratives of small town residents themselves, and their perceptions of the desirability of migration at this urban scale.

Livelihoods vary by origin due to capability differences

The urban-origin migrants in our FGDs engaged in wholesale retailing, ran small businesses or social enterprises such as private schools, often employing one or two local residents in the process. In Bugiri, better-resourced migrants from towns like Jinja, Mayuge, and Namutumba were drawn by land availability and rising property values to invest in farming, residential construction, and small businesses. Similarly, Mityana migrants, primarily better-off individuals from Kampala and Rwanda, described how they had purchased land due to affordable prices but faced challenges such as high living costs and limited work opportunities, prompting them to start their own businesses in the absence of formal employment. Some urban origin migrants were influenced by age

and the life course, whereby retirees had moved away from larger more expensive cities such as this Mpigi gentleman:

P1 was originally an engineer in Kampala where he worked for most of his youthful days. However, he wanted a bigger space where he could retire and settle after getting tired of being in Kampala. He had options in Mbarara, but this was very far for his children and it would limit their visits. He thus decided to buy land in Mpigi, since it's nearer to Kampala, and decided to set up a retail shop to keep himself busy. He moved with his wife and some of their younger children who are still in secondary school. (Mpigi Migrants)

However, not all urban origin migrants were older nor ready to retire, as Tables 3 and 4 show. Many were attracted simply by the context and cheaper land prices. In Mpigi rapid urban growth, driven by proximity to the Kampala region and infrastructural developments like the Expressway, attracted migrants from Kampala, Mbarara, and Northern Uganda seeking affordable land, housing, and access to services. Meanwhile, in Pallisa, urban migrants from larger towns such as Mbale and Soroti, as well as international investors connected to India or the Arab region, were claimed to be increasingly buying up land for real estate development, for agricultural initiatives, and for speculative purposes:

People are moving from Mbale and other towns. They come here to do business, to buy our agricultural products, and they see land is cheap. They see that there are many opportunities to do businesses, so they stay here. (FGD Women, Pallisa)

Of interest, and in contrast to some narratives of exploitative land deals, some described how locals welcomed outsider buyers because they paid higher prices and because of their hope that population growth would lead to economic and infrastructural development, as this quote from Pallisa notes:

The number of migrants has increased in the town because it's easy to acquire land and because the locals don't want to sell land to their fellow locals because these often give them more money than the locals. (Men, Pallisa)

Another interesting finding, attributed by FGD participants to a particular group of urban migrants in these towns, was related to the predatory moneylending phenomenon. It was noted how migrants from Western Uganda (yet now largely Kampala-based elites) had moved in and they dominate the money lending sector, giving residents high-interest rate loans (over 20%) which many of our participants complained were exploitative and causing considerable hardship. Respondents noted that these loan sharks imposed strict repayment terms and used harsh methods to demand repayment, and were exceptionally quick to confiscate collateral, seizing household items, even land or homes, if borrowers defaulted on their terms:

they take peoples National IDs and need their money at a specific time. So if an individual takes more than 10-minutes from bringing back the money in the specified time period, they find that the money has already accrued interest. (Participant 5, Luweero Women)

This phenomenon has caused tension with locals, though migrants can equally be affected. Indeed, the situation has become so problematic that President Museveni took notice and publicly declared a crack-down on unfair lending practices and blatant extortion with headlines stating ‘President Museveni declares war against money lenders’ (Mumbere 2024) and ‘Museveni lays out case against Ugandan money lenders’ (Independent 2024). The President’s declarations do not point to a specific group as being involved, but many of our respondents across several towns made links to Kampala-elites with Western Ugandan origins.

In contrast to the more entrepreneurial livelihoods, and cost-saving/cheap land, motivations of the urban-origin migrants, the residents of rural origin had primarily moved in search of better work, and as noted in Tables 1 and 5, they generally had less education, assets and capabilities. These rural migrants in our study towns often engaged in subsistence farming and informal self-employment, including activities such as hawking of plastics, welding, carpentry, tailoring, motorcycling (boda boda) driving (more men), and for women: mobile street vending or street food sales, with some resorting to prostitution. The sex workers we met (regardless of origin) had turned to the trade after being unable to find the hoped-for town job, and/or after failed sales ventures. Their livelihoods were vulnerable, informal and shaped by stigma and exclusion, with very low earnings:

We earn UGX10,000 (c. US\$3) for a night and UGX3,000–5,000 (c.US\$1) for short stays (Iganga sex worker woman)

Such remuneration is low and comes with obvious health and safety risks. Despite facing community stigma, police harassment, and challenges in family life many women saw this as their only option.

Other rural migrants described the benefits of small town living to be low rents (compared to larger cities), a larger customer base for their sales than back in their villages, and better services and infrastructure. However, they described a constant struggle with unemployment, low wages, and high living costs. Small town life for many rural migrants had not proven to be the dreamt-for panacea yet few we met considered going back to their rural communities, as the following quote emphasises:

There are very few opportunities in town, it is always problems. Every day we are trying to get the food to feed the children. We see very little opportunities in town. Yet it is better here than back in the village because there is always an opportunity to earn a little income by doing some small jobs. Someone sending you to make an errand and paying you a little money. You will never find this kind of opportunities in the villages. In town there is good will, people who understand our situation and help us with little money. This is something you will not find in the villages. Doing laundry is a small job you can find here; this is something you can't find in the village. You get UGX2,000 for laundry the clothes. You will not find this small money in the villages. (Poorest, Bugiri)

Many women (rural or town origin) operated home businesses like making soaps, crocheting, selling crops such as maize, beans, cassava, or raising livestock, selling firewood or charcoal, or they ran small street or market stalls. These represent vulnerable work

with low returns. Many residents also noted greater competition for sufficient market share or for already scarce work with town growth:

The influx of migrants creates a job shortage for they compete for the same jobs as the youths in Mityana for these engage in informal businesses. The migrants...are also challenged with stiff competition from the local businesses in the town, which makes their standards of living poor. (Mityana Youth)

Lifelong town residents mostly described livelihoods and experiences similar to the rural migrants. Many were quite positive to receiving migrants, noting how these could employ locals. Commonly these have been the urban origin migrants as noted above and in the following quote:

this development (in town) has brought about working opportunities in Masindi. P4 gave an example of a city tycoon who is a music promoter working in Kampala but born in the Masindi region (commonly known as Balamu), who has come back to Masindi for business...constructed a radio station and a hotel in Masindi... creating more working opportunities. (Men, Masindi)

Rural origin migrants moving in was commonly felt to bring a larger customer base for locals' small businesses, though the concern with competition was also mentioned.

The ten international FGD migrants, who had all fled conflict in neighbouring countries, were too few to draw conclusions from. They discussed experiencing many challenges, exclusion and stigma in the towns, but when they compared to the contexts they had escaped from, they all expressed feeling safe, and thereby relieved, in Uganda.

Similar experience of urban services regardless of origin

Despite the growth of these small towns, public infrastructure and service provision have not always met residents' expectations, with difficulty providing professional and efficient services. The degree of financial power a person had too often mediated the kind of infrastructure, healthcare or education that could be accessed. This picture, painted by FGD participants and supported by our survey data on access to water, electricity, sewerage connections, and paved roads, was remarkably similar across all towns, as this quote from Bugiri women encapsulates:

The town is growing because there are many people borrowing money to establish businesses. Yet the infrastructure is the same, it is only the commodities that have become more, and more expensive. There are more rich people that are getting money and putting up infrastructure. Only the poor are left out in the growth of town. Some of them see not real development, things are the same for them. (Bugiri sex workers)

The elderly in Luweero supported the assertion that population growth had increased the number of facilities and infrastructure but that these were not public:

They had observed an increase in the number of private health facilities, schools and buildings. They were happy for the improved security in town, however, they said that despite the development, service delivery, especially in public facilities such as hospitals, schools and local government...is still lagging behind (Luweero Elderly)

In contrast to this claim of better security, some of the towns asserted experiencing less security and greater problems with theft, and even with criminal gangs, with urban growth:

According to P1, new houses (both commercial and residential) have been put up in the area, the roads have been put in place which are even tarmacked. Schools in the area have also increased and according to P3, in the past, schools were very few and one had to move longer distances to attend which is not the case currently. The boda-bodas and taxis have also increased which has improved and quickened movement. The elderly also believed that the establishment of several projects, including Kinyara sugar works, has provided employment to several people. Development has however come with challenges, for example theft has increased in the area when thieves steal food and livestock...Development has also led to increased land wrangles between neighbours. They have settled too close to each other creating disagreements. (Masindi Elderly)

Of note is that this quote is from the town, Masindi, that was classed as most inclusive and doing best at redistributing developmental benefits in our wider work on assessing inclusivity (Mackay et al. 2025). However, diverse residents of Mpigi, and Pallisa in particular, repeatedly mentioned the impact of gangs, criminality, unemployment and corrupt or ineffective policing:

Like it was with the previous towns, the single mothers here are interfaced with insecurity issues...because of the newcomers. Other women supplemented that the high rate of unemployment amongst the youth is propelling the crime rate in terms of youth gangs attacking people and stealing their property, especially chickens and pigs, and small hand items such as wallets and phones. P2 narrated how she was attacked by a phone thief at night on one street. She had to exchange a few punches with the thief until when she managed to run away to escape a serious retaliation from the gang of the many youth across the road. "The police don't help you if you don't have money" (all the women shouted yes in agreement) (Mpigi Female-headed households)

the appearance of some guys taking marijuana. They have a gang called B-13, they have guns and a venue in town here. After 8 pm is not safe. (Pallisa Poorest)

The increasing population...into the town has improved the road networks. Yet the youth group called B13 are untouchables (cannot be arrested by police). B13 is a gang of criminals who terrorise Pallisa residents. According to the participants, this gang is organized with a 'commander' leadership structure. The gang is well known by security officers, but it seemed like they bribe their way out if they are reported or arrested. The participants reported that their 'command centre' is at an undeveloped space that belongs to the Police. They also reported that this group has confidants and connections within the local police with whom they coordinate to the extent that they can stop arrests of their members. They have various spots they operate from and these have become 'no go' areas for residents especially during the night. (Pallisa Men)

It should be emphasised that migrants (rural and urban) were embedded within all these focus groups together with life residents of the towns. The voices of the migrant-specific

groups were not dissimilar when it came to their experience of urban infrastructure and services:

the government cannot give proper services to its people. As a poor people we don't have access to any medical insurance and as things are, the services can only be obtained by the rich people and not the poor. There is a lot of corruption in service delivery...(and) some...services are only for a certain group of people. The government continuously denies responsibility on the poor service delivery and instead reports that it delegates the services, for example to UMEME for electricity, National Water and Sewerage Cooperation for water delivery, who have not done their job very well. (Participant 6, Mpigi Migrants)

However, migrants did occasionally report experiencing some tension or discrimination due to them not originating in the area as Pallisa migrants note:

They ask for bribe for one to be given a job, yet it is not guaranteed (that you get promised job), and if you complain they tell to go back where you migrated from. (Migrants, Pallisa)

Nevertheless, this kind of stigma, or ethnically related tension, did not seem to be too serious a problem according to our data (see also the next section on narratives around migrations).

The conclusion of money as mediator for much service and infrastructural access applies as much to lifelong residents as for migrants. Much of urban Ugandan life is private, not public (as supported by (Satterthwaite 2016) and (Korah and Cobbinah 2024)), with private provision often undermining (sometimes deliberately via corruption or sabotage) public provision.

Narrative of migration as positive and desirable for small towns

People moving into these small Ugandan towns has brought both opportunities and challenges and has helped shape their social and economic landscapes. Migrants had contributed to local development by investing in businesses, infrastructure, and services, or creating work opportunities. Wealthier migrants brought resources and innovations, such as hotels, radio stations and retailing, while less-resourced migrants provide labour or manage to scrape by. Despite these contributions, locals faced rising living costs, such as increased rent and land prices, as wealthier migrants outbid them. Cultural change and the introduction of new behaviours by migrants also influenced local communities, sometimes creating tension, other times bringing positive outlooks and new ideas:

an increase in the migrants has changed the behaviours of the people in Mpigi. Originally Mpigi had a lot of witch doctors and people continuously bewitched each other's progress. However, with migrants coming in people have diversified, new religions have come in creating a newer and better society. The migrants face challenges of fitting in and getting used to their new community...however, they adapt quickly, reducing the challenges faced, (Mpigi Migrants)

Locals, as some of the earlier quotations revealed in emphasises, sometimes preferred selling land to migrants to fund education or secure their needs, seeing these interactions as mutually beneficial. Others, however, cited being slowly pushed off their land

by processes of intimidation, or being outbid by in-migrants with more capital, and by the insecurity of traditional tenurial systems that cannot always withstand capitalist pressures:

The number of migrants has increased in the town because it's easy to acquire land and because the locals don't want to sell land to their fellow locals because these often give them more money than the locals. (Men, Pallisa)

One of the major challenges that the elderly persons pointed out was the insecure tenure. Since many of them held land under the kibanja¹ arrangement, they faced the threat of being evicted when the time came for the landlords/landladies to sell off their land for lucrative prices given the knock-on effects of land speculation accompanying the urbanisation of the area (Mpigi Elderly)

The influx of migrants had also led to social and economic disparities, with locals feeling excluded and marginalized in some towns:

I feel like with development, corruption has also increased, for example it's only people in the upper classes that benefit from development and the poor people feel rejected and left out. (Masindi, Female-headed households)

Wealthier migrants, it was claimed, segregated themselves from locals in gated homes with high walls. Some groups of international migrants were criticised for poor sanitation, exploitative practices, and failing to integrate to local norms. Issues like land speculation, tribalism, and competition for resources added to observed challenges. Some towns discussed the discrimination migrants from other Ugandan regions might face, or language barriers, or migrants bringing an increase in crime (such as theft, or drug use) but generally these did not seem to be widely held views. The towns that had a somewhat greater presence of international migrants, such as Luweero and Masindi, did raise concerns around cultural clashes, undesirable behaviours, criminal gangs or political patronage:

These migrants [referring to international migrants from the East African region] who come are favoured by the authorities and some of them come with support with powerful connections with those in authority. The police have also fuelled insecurity because they take bribes from [named nationality]. (Men, Masindi)

Such sentiments underscore the occasional need for initiatives to address social tensions, promote inclusion, and mitigate the pressures on housing, jobs, and local infrastructure as small towns grow quickly, just as Mulumba and Olema (2009) as well as Christiaensen and Lozano-Garcia (2024) note. In general, however, migration was felt overall to be positive and desirable for these small towns, and a key factor driving economic growth and creating opportunities:

It is very good with migrants...the town becomes busier, then we have more customers. There is also a certain number of people needed to become a municipality of higher level, so we need more people to come. (Bugiri Women)

¹ Kibanja is a legal traditional practice within the Uganda mailo tenure system and confers considerable rights to the holder, yet landlords can still sell the land.

The latter part of this quote echoes the attitude of many politicians and civil servants who equate more people with being able to apply to the central government for a higher status in the Ugandan urban hierarchy. Higher status is assumed to bring more funds and therefore more services and infrastructure (Mackay et al. 2025), yet this is not a given once higher status is achieved, and the time before such status might be attained can be characterised by a rising strain on already inadequate services such as electrical and water connections, as well as hospital and medical provision and educational services (Pozhidaev 2020).

These sections have contextualised the experiences and characteristics of these seven rapidly growing small towns in Uganda, outlining who was moving, who stayed in place, reasons and relations and highlighted some of the implications for urban development. The next section filters our findings through Hein de Haas's aspirations-capability theory to shed further light on the diversity of migrant aims and ambitions and the reality of how the various types of migrants' achievements may have been shaped by their degree of agency and their positionality in relation to societal structures.

Further analysis: relating to aspirations-capabilities theory

Relating our "[Findings](#)" (addressing our first and second research questions) to the theory framework, we now filter our data through Haas's Aspirations-Capabilities framework (Section [Theory: aspirations and capabilities framework](#) "") in order to address our final research question. Such analysis makes it apparent that these small Ugandan towns host several kinds of migrants simultaneously (as well as lifelong residents). A town's in-migrants all moved to the same geographic context but with different aspirations and capabilities, which in turn likely influenced their experience of the rapid urban change occurring.

The Haas classification of 'precarious migrants' encapsulates well our findings on the rural-origin migrants to small towns and their subsequent precarious lives. However, less clear from our analysis is where our urban-origin migrants to small towns fit. We found that that urban-origin migrants generally had more resources behind them and therefore had higher freedom from negative liberties than rural-origin migrants, but their positive liberties are not sufficient to classify them under '**Free migration**'. They rather seem, from our data, to fall into the classification of '**Improvement Migration**' despite going somewhat 'against-the-flow' by not moving to larger cities or abroad, and despite not so clearly fitting the description presented in Fig. 2.

Figure 6 summarises our findings in a graphic inspired by the aspirations-capability framework. What this figure illustrates is that each of the studied towns in Uganda was simultaneously home to those who (at least up to the point of our survey) had stayed-in-place (either voluntarily or via lack of options), precarious migrants, improvement migrants, free migrants and distress migrants (using Haas's terminology and concepts). The same is likely to be true of many places of course. What applying our data to this framework helps illuminate is the clear differences in agency of different kinds of residents, as expressed via both different aspirations for life in the town, and different capabilities. We recognise that life is not static and just because someone had stayed within the town they were born at the time of our survey does not indicate that they will never leave the town in the future.

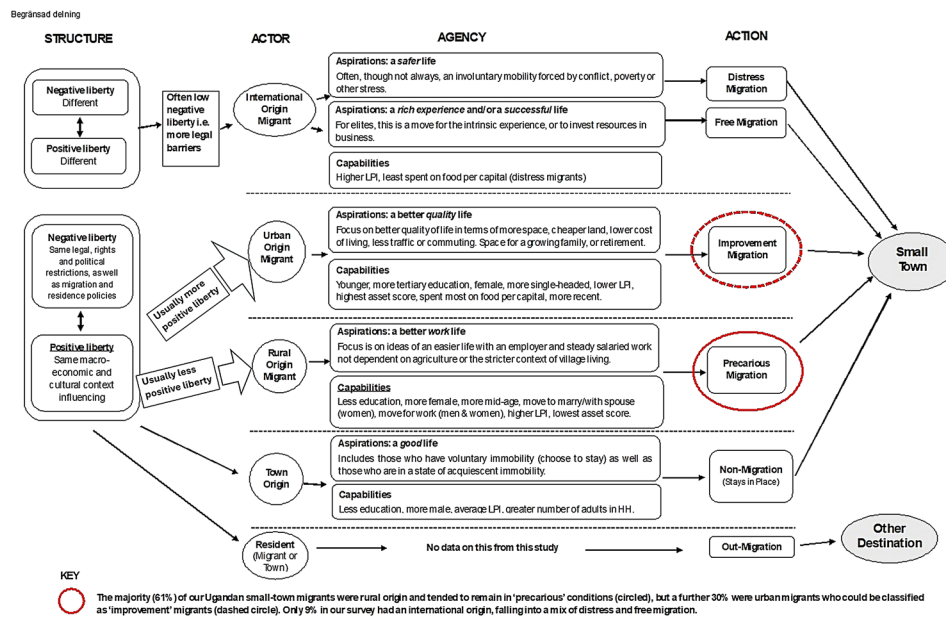


Fig. 6 Applying the aspirations-capability framework to the Ugandan small-town data (Source: Authors' own, using Haas (2021) as inspiration)

In terms of societal structures, we interpret that international origin migrants clearly come from places shaped by different regulatory structures, educational regimes, labour market contexts and so forth. Since we did not explore international migrants' structural contexts, we do no more than note in the figure that their configuration of negative and positive liberty will differ somewhat from the Ugandan context. For Ugandan-origin migrants (and residents), however, we interpret them as being situated within the same macro legislative and political systems and subject to the same kinds of migratory and residence policies. They are affected by the same macro-economic and educational and employment structures. However, drawing from a socio-ecological model (Holdsworth and Landais 2019), from the individual through the family, the community, to the society (as Haas also notes), there will exist structural variation within the domestic population. Particularly, when for example Northern Ugandans experienced conflict which shaped their liberties in ways different from Central and Southern Ugandans, or when Mt. Elgon region Ugandans are being forced to move due to climate change-triggered landslides. Even cultural traditions and familial attitudes and behaviours shape the structures within which a person finds themselves. Our assertions here are open to contestation; it may be that we assume too much structural similarity across Uganda's geography, rurality and urbanity. Structural opportunities and constraints were, however, not an explicit research agenda within this work, so this part could benefit from further research. Our data, as Fig. 6 shows, was more suited to comparative analysis of aspirations and capabilities. Nevertheless, we deem improvement migrants to generally have more positive liberty than precarious migrants.

In terms of aspirations, we identified common themes from our qualitative data whereby there were two types of international migrants: those distress migrants fleeing conflict, war, famine or climate change, and a few elite international lifestyle movers termed as 'free' migrants. Distress migrants were usually from the wider East African region and may have had the ability to move to Uganda themselves or may have come

via formal refugee programmes. Common to those we met who fell into the distress migrant classification of Haas was an overriding aspiration for a *safer* life. Free migrants in Uganda are often elite Kenyans or Rwandans, some few British, and more commonly those of Indian-origin or Middle Eastern origin. Such free migrants were framed by our small town residents as having an aspiration of achieving *business success*, and in some few cases could be classed as being in the elite position of being able to pursue *rich experiences*, as Haas discusses (Haas 2021).

In contrast, improvement migration (who in our data consisted largely of urban origin migrants) was motivated by seeking a *better quality* of life in terms of pollution-free, traffic-jam free, cheaper land, cheaper rents, simpler daily lives, proximity to facilities. Precarious migrants were mostly rural origin and overwhelmingly focused on seeking *work*, even for many women, although females also featured more strongly in having moved either to marry, or immediately following marriage with their husband. Either way, the ultimate motivation was seeking better work opportunities for the spouses.

In Fig. 6 we pose that those who voluntarily stay-in-place (voluntary immobility, Haas's terminology), i.e. those born and brought up in town and happy to remain, deemed their environment as providing a *good* life. It could be argued that those with acquiescent immobility may not agree that it was a particularly *good* life, but perhaps sufficient to say that it was *good enough*. Under the agency column in Fig. 6 we summarise conceptually, from our data, the general capabilities, assets and resources of these various types of residents. Clear from this is that urban-origin improvement migrants had higher capabilities, resources, assets, education and sometimes networks to draw upon than other migrants (and often more also than town natives).

Our data-driven conclusion, based on our mixed analyses, is that in addition to the efforts of lifelong residents, two types of migrants are dominant in shaping the growth and development trajectories of the studied towns: those urban-origin *improvement*-motivated migrants, and those rural-origin work-hopes or marriage-related migrants who too-often remain in somewhat *precarious* lifestyles (see circles in Fig. 6). Precarious rural to urban migrants comprised 61% of our small-town migrants (Fig. 6). As already noted in "[Findings](#)", many of the 31% improvement migrants downshifted from larger cities, and had the aspiration of a better *quality* of life, and had greater resources, assets and capabilities to bring to bear in establishing their urban life (Fig. 6).

Discussion & implications

This manuscript aimed to compare by origin inhabitants' experiences of daily life challenges and opportunities as well as access to infrastructure and services across seven small but fast-growing Ugandan towns. In addition, we considered where domestic in-migrants to towns had moved there from, and the local narratives around urban growth and migration. and The aspirations-capabilities framework of Hein de Haas's (Haas 2021) was further used as an analytical filter, revealing how the same town can be home for multiple types of residents with diverse aspirations and differing capabilities.

The rural-to-urban migrants moving in search of work seemed to remain with somewhat precarious lives and had perhaps not accumulated massive winnings from their move, much in line with Herrin et al's (2009) and Awumbila's (2015) earlier findings. Nevertheless, even those rural migrants we met who struggled with urban life were reluctant to return to their villages, deeming a challenging small town life was still

preferable to the rural life they left behind. Some had lost connections to their rural home and relatives, some had perhaps left due to land loss/tenure insecurity in their village or due to other forms of conflict. There was also, we felt, an element of not wishing to lose-face/admit failure to their village communities that kept people in place and hoping that continuing urban development might bring them a better chance (the paper by Herrin *et al.* (2009) lends support to this reasoning).

However the less-studied urban-to-urban migrants (Mulumba and Olema 2009) demonstrated different geographic origins, aspirations and capabilities compared to rural migrants. Indications that this group comprised more educated people and more female with smaller household size supports some of the findings by Tumwesigye *et al.* (2021) and Mulumba and Olema's (2009) call for more investigation of female migration within Uganda. Our findings contribute to a gap in the literature (Mulumba and Olema 2009; Selod and Shilpi 2021) around urban-origin domestic migration. The move to smaller towns that our data captures may also have accelerated as a consequence of the Covid-19 related lockdowns, knock-on rental and other price rises, and the clearings of hawkers, street traders and many informally employed that occurred in Kampala under the auspices of infectious disease responses (Bukonya *et al.* 2022). These occurrences made urban life much more challenging, perhaps especially in the capital city, and may have pushed people to leave the GKMA/return to home regions/move to smaller towns that were cheaper and perhaps less restrictive in their covid responses (local team knowledge supports these assertions).

Our focus groups presented evidence that town residents perceived that the urban-origin migrants were often the ones who started new businesses, brought outside capital, new ways of thinking and contributed to the development of small towns and generally did quite well for themselves. This supports the assertions of Christiaensen *et al.* (2024) and the IOM (IOM and Habitat 2021) on the positive contribution in-migration can make, especially in small and intermediate cities.

These small Ugandan towns are growing partly due to natural increase, partly due to their reclassification in the urban hierarchy, and partly due to in-migration. We found 60% of in-migrants to these small towns came from nearby rural districts, matching findings from other studies on migrants staying relatively nearby (Mulumba and Olema 2009; Tumwesigye *et al.* 2021). Yet we found approximately a third of migrants had moved from other urban areas and we document the different motivations and capabilities supporting these movers. This work presents a contribution to knowledge on internal migration and small town growth that researchers have called for, and especially regarding the understudied urban-to-urban migrants, and on female migrants (Mulumba and Olema 2009; Selod and Shilpi 2021).

The narratives on migration that we documented were more positive and welcoming than the national or official narratives of the need to control migration (IOM, 2015). Residents themselves overwhelmingly portrayed migration as a good thing for their town as it brought new ideas, new ways of doing things, to some degree new jobs, and ultimately (in their view) supported at least an increase in the number of service points and facilities (such as water points, electricity infrastructure development, paving of roads and the number of clinics and school). However, residents did acknowledge that greater *number* of people did not always equate to better *quality* of services, and especially not when many were provided privately and cash was required for access. These findings

support those from other recent studies such as (Christiaensen & Lozano-Gracia 2024; IOM and Habitat, 2021; Korah and Cobbinah 2024) and emphasise their claims of the need for small towns to proactively plan for, and better manage, the delivery of services for an expanding population (Christiaensen & Lozano-Gracia, 2024). This is a further contribution to research on the growth of smaller towns in Uganda and even Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole.

Finally, the use of the aspirations-capabilities framework and the diagrammatic presentation of our findings in Fig. 6 helped visualise the simultaneous presence of different origins of small town residents and their contrasting aspirations and capabilities. In this way the paper shines a light on how one-and-the-same place can represent different things for different people depending on what they were aiming for, and how the same town could work well for people with certain capabilities and positionalities while not really leveraging great change in circumstance for others. Utilising the aspirations-capability framework in this way helps reveal the multiple and diverse motivations and positionalities that have shaped different peoples' decision to be in the same town. The model helps provides a contextualised and 'more meaningful understanding of agency... within given sets of perceived opportunity structures' (Haas 2021, pp. 30–31), as Haas suggested in his work.

Implications for policy or practice

Our findings around the more educated and female urban downsizer suggest that policy and practice, could better consider women's needs in terms of supporting the entrepreneurship of women moving in with education and resources. In addition, towns could consider what childcare and healthcare facilities are available and how these are accessed. Yet small towns in Uganda are under-capacitated and lack control of their own budgets and are heavily reliant on the central government. To reduce the precarious nature of certain residents, like many rural migrants, is perhaps even more challenging. A major reason for their precarity is the structure of the labour market, the lack of formal jobs and a lack of regulations or employee securities. These are national-level issues. Actions to support and improve the desirability and viability of rural life similarly require national attention. There may be local actions that could be taken to encourage social networking and advocate for inclusive urban growth, but finding an actor to take ownership of such an initiative in these resource-constrained contexts could be challenging.

Perhaps one of the more significant contributions of our paper is to nuance the sometimes negative/control rhetoric of urban policy. By highlighting the rather positive discourse around in-migration found in residents of these towns our work can help to redefine the narrative. Local authorities could thus be encouraged to more actively consider how they might welcome and harness the capacities of in-comers to town, without alienating existing residents. There could be schemes linking local business owners with in-coming innovators to stimulate a creative and inclusive entrepreneurial energy, for example. There may even be local tax-relief or license application fee discounts that could be offered.

Our findings also serve as a caution to a blatant population-numbers first approach to urban growth. Policymakers and urban planners need to consider how to plan for growth in terms of quality infrastructure and service provision. Consideration, for example to professionalism of staff, efficiency of systems, and ways of reducing the need for

bribes, are other examples. Urban growth ambitions of towns should be tempered with an understanding that quality providing for such population matters for an inclusive development. Yet the capacity and finances necessary to pursue such are challenges to strategic planning.

Conclusion

This study has investigated how small but fast-growing Ugandan towns are of relevance for the country's urban future. We highlight how town residents are not homogenous and that experiences of urban life in these contexts may differ by gender, by migration experience or by educational background. In applying the aspirations–capabilities framework, our analysis highlights how different resident's hopes and resources interact differently with structural constraints to produce divergent outcomes. This theory lens helped illuminate why rural migrants' aspirations were more inhibited, while urban migrants' different aspirations and stronger capabilities enabled them to achieve improvement in lifestyle. The work demonstrates the value of this theory lens for understanding broader questions of inclusion and exclusion in small-town development.

An important contribution is in nuancing prevailing narratives: while national policy discourses can frame urban growth via migration as something to be controlled, residents of these seven towns portrayed in-migration as a positive development force. Recognising this difference is useful. An inclusive development of small Ugandan towns cannot be built around population growth alone; it requires consideration of the quality, accessibility, and affordability of infrastructure and services and the possibility for employment. A shift to recognising migrants as a resource rather than a burden would be a constructive way forward in small towns becoming sites of more inclusive and resilient urban futures.

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Author contributions

PKN was involved in the data collection and ran analyses of the survey data and drafted parts of the manuscript text. HM was responsible for leading research design methodologies, was involved in aspects of data collection, was responsible for paper conceptualisation, for the theoretical framing and analysis, for analysing the qualitative data, and writing parts of the manuscript text. HM also designed and produced (co-produced in case of Fig 4) the maps and figures. PIM was involved in survey data collection, advised on the theoretical framework and local context, and contributed to manuscript text. FM led the Ugandan fieldwork including survey and focus group discussions, provided contextual knowledge, data insights, and read and contributed to manuscript text. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data availability

The raw data from the survey is available at the following national Swedish public database repository <https://researchdata.se/sv/catalogue/dataset/2025-78> Citation: Andersson, A. (2025). Inkluderande urbanisering i små städer i Tanzania och Uganda (Version 1) [Data set]. Lund University. <https://doi.org/10.5878/7xar-m752> The focus group summary notes can be made available upon request.

Declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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