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## INNOVATION PLATFORMS AND VALUE CHAIN ROLE EXPANSION AMONG UGANDAN COFFEE FARMERS: EVIDENCE ON PEER LEARNING, GROUP OPTION, AND LEGITIMACY

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### ABSTRACT

Innovation platforms can help Ugandan coffee smallholders expand their roles in the value chain, beyond production, when they create repeated peer learning, support group action, and build legitimacy for new roles. However, most research emphasises platform design and average outcomes and says little about the daily social costs of upgrading attempts, such as recognition, trust, moral pressure, and jealousy. This study examines how smallholders in eastern Uganda identify value chain constraints, what they learn through platform participation, and how local legitimacy shapes who persists as trader, mobiliser, or processor. Qualitative methods were used, including focus group discussions and interviews of 91 innovation platform participants from Kapchorwa, Manafwa, and Namisindwa districts. The study applied a reflective thematic analysis. The study found that the expansion of the roles beyond primary production, including marketing, buying, coordination, and service, is achieved through practical learning, peer learning, training and interactions. The dynamics of recognition by others enhance farmers' trust, enabling them to sustain these expanded roles. On the other hand, recognition also creates new obligations and moral pressure, with expectations for support, training others, and exemplary behaviour, which sometimes contribute to conflict and to withdrawal from leadership or facilitation roles. As much as collective action spaces created opportunities for bargaining and visibility, they also generated tensions over governance and the sharing of benefits. This study contributes to extension research by illustrating how platforms contribute to value chain upgrading through socially verified learning and legitimacy, and by creating social costs for the longevity of new farmer roles. The policy implications point to the need to design innovation platforms that consider governance, equitable recognition and opportunities, and support for farmer intermediaries.

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### INTRODUCTION

Coffee production is a major source of income for millions of smallholder farmers in Uganda, who account for most of the sector's producers. As reported by MAAIF (2025), Uganda exported 8.7 million 60 kg bags valued at USD 2.5 billion in 2024-2025. These export figures show how much value is tied to quality, aggregation, and consistent supply.

However, most smallholder farmers still capture little of the value because they remain confined to primary production and sell raw coffee at the farm gate, under arrangements in which other stakeholders control pricing, grading, and market information (Onyas et al., 2018). Markets and policy both encourage farmers to move beyond producing cherries into activities that determine who captures value,

such as post-harvest handling, bulking, and quality control (Onyas et al., 2018; Tamru and Minten, 2023). Uganda's National Coffee Policy and the National Development Plan III explicitly promote value addition along the chain, including stronger farm-level processing and broader adoption of certification (GOV, 2021, 2020). For smallholder farmers, this shift is not a simple technical upgrade. It requires coordination, clear governance rules, and capital (Ochago, 2025). It also requires social acceptance. A farmer can learn a role and still fail to perform it if other stakeholders do not recognise their right to coordinate or transact (Ochago, 2024).

Pluralistic extension systems, defined as advisory and support services delivered through a mix of public agencies, private firms, non-governmental organisations, and farmer organizations rather than a single government provider (Birner et al., 2009), increasingly promoted innovation platforms as a mechanism for achieving rural development outcomes (Schut et al., 2018). According to Sartas et al. (2019), innovation platforms bring together farmers, private-sector stakeholders, researchers, and government agencies to diagnose constraints and coordinate action. Schut et al. (2016) and Tui et al. (2013) describe them as structured spaces for interaction, experimentation, and coordination among stakeholders with different resources and authorities. This logic is relevant in the coffee value chains, where upgrading depends not only on technical practices but also on negotiated relationships, trust and coordination among stakeholders (Magala et al., 2018; Ochago et al., 2024a).

However, evidence remains limited on the micro-processes that link platform-based learning to actual role expansion (Ochago et al., 2024a). For example, Opola et al. (2023), describe peer learning and legitimacy building, but do not show how experiential learning becomes recognised trust, or how that recognition enables farmers to take on intermediary roles such as local buying, aggregating, coordinating, etc. This is a consequential gap. If platforms are designed mainly around training attendance and knowledge transfer, they miss the social dynamics that shape role outcomes, including who gets assigned to keep records, who is trusted to handle payments during group sales, who gains visibility, and who is accepted as a coordinator (Onyas et al., 2018). This study addresses this gap in the coffee sector of Eastern Uganda by examining how platforms function to build capacity and legitimacy through recognition by peers and institutions. It then traces how these processes translate into expanded value chain

roles, including when role expansion stabilises and when it becomes socially contested.

This paper makes three contributions to platform-based extension services. First, it provides grounded evidence that peer exchange and hands-on engagement support participants' learning in market-facing roles. Second, it clarifies that recognition has a double-edged effect: it can increase credibility, but it can also create resistance or rivalry that destabilises role expansion over time. Finally, it links microsocial processes within platforms to the broader processes of value chain upgrading, making the trade-offs visible for platform facilitation and governance.

## Literature Review

### Evolving roles of agricultural extension

Extension and advisory services are no longer judged only on agronomy and yields. They are increasingly expected to help smallholders engage with markets by coordinating with other stakeholders, meeting quality requirements, and negotiating market relations in complex value chains (Janvry et al., 2019). This shifts the required competence from producing to transacting (Ochago et al., 2024b; Siankwilimba et al., 2021). In the coffee value chain, upgrading into premium markets often requires three things: quality control skills like grading and quality assurance; market capabilities like consumer information and negotiation; and coordination tools like collective selling, alongside improved agronomic practices (Watanabe et al., 2017). While this literature recognises this shift, it is less clear how market-oriented advisory support reshapes farmers' daily roles and responsibilities.

### Innovation platforms as coordination arrangements for upgrading

Innovation platforms are presented as an alternative to linear technology transfer approaches (Schut et al., 2016). They convene diverse stakeholders to jointly diagnose bottlenecks and coordinate action across the value chain (Sartas et al., 2019; Schut et al., 2018; Schut et al., 2016). Studies such as Sartas et al. (2019) and Schut et al. (2018), find that when stakeholders align around shared problems and credible rules, platforms can reduce market failures, strengthen linkages, and enable collective marketing. However, the same literature warns that platforms are not neutral: power asymmetries can reproduce hierarchies, and dependence on external funding can weaken sustainability (Magala et al., 2018; Sartas et al., 2019). Hence, while platforms can help stakeholders move into

market-facing roles, they can also concentrate influence and legitimacy on a few individuals unless governance actively protects inclusion (Sartas et al., 2019; Turyahikayo et al., 2017).

### **Learning mechanisms in platforms: peer learning, and social learning**

Studies of innovation platforms often cite learning as a core function (Schut et al., 2018). In the same literature, peer learning refers to farmer-to-farmer exchange and mentoring that builds practical competence through shared experience (Ochago, 2024; Onyas et al., 2018). Social learning refers to broader collective shifts in understanding and practice that emerge through repeated interaction and joint problem solving (McCarthy et al., 2011; Wals, 2023). Coffee platform work in Uganda suggests that peer and social learning often take an experiential and reflective form: farmers learn through experimentation, feedback, and discussion rather than through training attendance alone (Ochago, 2025; Ochago et al., 2021). This matters for role uptake because learning interactions shape role identity, including how farmers see themselves and how they believe others perceive them. These identity perceptions condition whether they step into coordination roles (Ochago et al., 2024a).

### **Collective action, standards, and governance problems**

Expanding farmers' roles into aggregation, trading, or processing often requires collective action because buyers demand volume and consistency that individual farmers struggle to supply (Onyas et al., 2018). Evidence from Uganda shows that collective marketing can improve market access, but it also entails coordination costs and exposes the group to free-riding (Magala et al., 2018; Turyahikayo et al., 2017). Standards and certification can strengthen coordination by structuring transactions, yet they can also intensify internal disputes because compliance costs and benefits are unevenly distributed (Onyas et al., 2018). If upgrading depends on farmers sustaining intermediary roles, these coordination frictions make governance and perceived fairness central to retaining those roles over time (Ochago, 2025, 2024).

### **Recognition, legitimacy, and contested new roles**

The literature on legitimacy helps explain why some farmers sustain expanded roles while others withdraw. Legitimacy is a generalised judgment by others that a role holder has the right to act in that role and that their actions

are appropriate within local norms and value chain expectations (Bennet, 2019; de Boon et al., 2022). Recognition is more specific and relational, taking the form of identifiable social acts of acknowledgement by peers, buyers, institutions, and platform stakeholders, such as praise, being labelled competent, or being consulted (Cadilhon et al., 2018; Kihira and Maruyama, 2025; Leeuwis et al., 2021). Expanded roles, such as those of a broker, quality lead, and model farmer, depend on both legitimacy and recognition (Audouin, 2014; Ochago, 2024). Farmers need competence, but they also need social acceptance to handle money, enforce quality decisions, or negotiate on behalf of others (Audouin, 2014; Ochago, 2024). In coffee-producing communities, farmers who become market intermediaries may face moral judgment or jealousy, especially when benefits appear uneven, which erodes legitimacy and pushes them to step back (Ochago, 2024; Onyas et al., 2018). Expanded roles are thus socially risky, carrying reputational exposure that production-focused changes often do not (Ochago, 2025, 2024).

In summary, innovation platforms can enable value chain role expansion by creating repeated learning opportunities, supporting collective action, and generating recognition and legitimacy that make new roles socially acceptable and stable. However, much of the literature focuses on platform design features and aggregate outcomes, with limited field-based evidence on the daily social consequences of attempts to upgrade. These consequences include recognition, trust, moral pressure, and jealousy, and they shape those who persist in new roles like trader, mobiliser, or local processor. This study addresses this gap in coffee innovation platforms in Eastern Uganda by analysing how learning, collective action, and recognition interact to enable role expansion, and how these same processes can generate social costs that undermine role stability.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research setting**

The study was conducted in Eastern Uganda on the slopes of Mount Elgon, a region where agriculture serves as the primary source of livelihood and is characterised by a high population density, necessitating intensive smallholder farming (Bartl, 2019; Graham et al., 2022). I studied coffee innovation platform cases in Kapchorwa district (Sebei sub-region) and in Manafwa and Namisindwa districts (Bugisu sub-region) (Ochago, 2025). Agriculture is the defining feature of the farming systems in this montane environment. Altitude shapes the farming systems. High- and mid-altitude

areas are dominated by banana-coffee systems, while the lowlands focus more on maize and beans. Farms are typically small, often less than one acre, reflecting the fragmented nature of landownership in the region (Gram et al., 2018). The National Agriculture Extension policy increasingly promotes the use of commodity-based stakeholder platforms, such as innovation platforms, to strengthen coordination, peer learning, and support smallholders' movement into higher value chain roles (Kaweesa et al., 2021; MAAIF/DAES, 2016). By bringing farmers into regular interaction with researchers, buyers, and other value chain stakeholders, these innovation platforms aim to enable upgrading beyond production into roles such as aggregation and marketing (Schut et al., 2018; Willy et al., 2017).

The innovation platforms established under the Value Chain Innovation Platforms for Food Security (VIP4FS) project, funded by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) (Okia et al., 2020), were studied. These innovation platforms were established as local coordination spaces that brought together farmers and other relevant value chain stakeholders to organise collective action, strengthen capacities, improve productivity, and connect producer groups to markets. These platforms were formed at lower administrative levels, primarily at the village and parish levels. Each platform averaged about 35 members and typically represented 4 to 10 farmer groups drawn from 4 to 8 villages. For coffee, 15 Innovation Platforms were established in Kapchorwa and Manafwa, with Manafwa later administratively split into Manafwa and Namisindwa districts. Makerere University coordinated the project by convening stakeholders, guiding innovation development, conducting needs assessments, supporting capacity building, and leading monitoring and evaluation with local implementers.

### Research design

This qualitative cross-sectional case study explored farmers' experiences on an innovation platform, focusing on changes in roles along the coffee value chain, learning paths for new roles, and the effects of trust and recognition on role sustainability (Yin, 2018). Using purposive sampling, diverse participants were selected based on gender, age, participation duration, and farming experience. Data collection included interviews and focus group discussions. Thematic analysis was employed to make sense of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006), with the triangulation and audit trail consistent with recommendations for trustworthiness

(Nowell et al., 2017). Coding followed changes in the role domains, learning processes, trust, and commitment in platform governance, recognition processes, and in connecting these factors to post-support practices.

### Case selection

Purposive sampling recruited 91 coffee innovation platform farmers, selected by gender for active participation in the value chain activities and at least five years of coffee farming experience (Table 1). This criterion ensured that the participants could describe changes in their roles, learning, and day-to-day platform-related support. To capture diversity, the study used maximum variation across districts, platforms, and value chain roles (ordinary members, committee leaders, aggregation leaders, quality leads), and gender.

The study first recruited participants for the focus group discussion.

In the Kapchorwa district, the author worked with the district innovation platform coordinator and platform facilitators to compile a list of eligible farmers. Participants were drawn from four platforms, with at least two women and two men to reflect gender experiences and diverse roles. Facilitators contacted the farmers to confirm their availability, and recruitment stopped once the target number was reached. This process yielded 16 focus group participants in Kapchorwa, 15 in Manafwa, and 12 in Namisindwa, for a total of 43 participants from 11 coffee innovation platforms. Chema coffee IP was excluded from the focus group discussion because the facilitator was unavailable to validate the sample frame and support mobilisation, avoiding opportunistic recruitment. The study later included chema through individual in-depth interviews after the facilitator returned.

Individual interviews were then used to triangulate and extend the focus group findings. With the help of the district coordinator, facilitators, and focus group participants, the author compiled an additional list of eligible farmers to broaden the range of years of platform participation and value chain roles, including those who did not speak during focus group discussions. The study conducted 16 interviews per district and stopped when additional interviews yielded no new information, for a total of 48. Across the group discussion and interviews, 59% of the respondents were male, with an average age of 47 years. Most respondents were married (91%). Of those interviewed, approximately 44% completed secondary education, which typically lasted 11 years (Table 2).

Table 1. Respondents by district, sub-county, and innovation platforms.

District	Sub county	Innovation platform	FGDs (n)	Individual interviews (n)
Kapchorwa	Municipality Western Division	Arokwo Coffee IP	6	4
	Tegeres	Chema Coffee IP	0	4
	Kabeywa	Kabeywa Coffee IP	5	4
	Municipality East and Central Divisions	Mt. Elgon Women in Coffee IP	5	4
Kapchorwa subtotal			16	16
Manafwa	Butta	Butta Coffee IP	7	4
	Bukhofo	Bukhofo Coffee IP	4	4
	Nalondo	Busyula Coffee IP	2	4
	Bukhofo	Bukusu Coffee IP	2	4
Manafwa subtotal			15	16
Namisindwa	Bukhoho	Bukhoho Coffee IP	4	8
	Mukoto	Mukoto Coffee IP	4	4
	Bumbo	Bumbo Coffee IP	4	4
Namisindwa subtotal			12	16
Total			43	48

Note:

1. Municipality and Central division are reported as one row in this figure, though it covers two administrative divisions in the sampling frame
2. Chema coffee IP members did not participate in FGDs.
3. Two innovation platforms operated in Bukhofu sub county (Bukhofu coffee IP and Bukusu coffee IP)

Table 2. Respondents' demographic information.

Respondents' demographic information		Districts			Total	Percent
		Kapchorwa	Manafwa	Namisindwa		
Respondent Sex	Male	13	21	20	54	59
	Female	19	10	8	37	41
Total		32	31	28	91	100
Respondent's education level	None	1	0	0	1	1
	Primary level	7	15	13	34	37
	Secondary level	15	12	12	40	44
	Certificate	1	0	0	1	1
	Diploma/College	7	2	0	9	10
	University	1	2	3	6	7
Total		32	31	28	91	100
Respondent's marital status	Married	29	28	26	83	91
	Not married	3	3	2	8	9
Total		32	31	28	91	100
Respondent household status	Household head	16	20	21	57	63
	Spouse	16	10	6	32	35
	Child	0	1	1	2	2
Total		32	31	28	91	100

### Data collection

Data collection involved focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. With participants' consent, all sessions were audio recorded and complemented with notes to support accurate analysis (Bryman, 2016; Tessier, 2012). In each district, the team held two focus group discussions at a central location, each with about eight participants. Most qualitative method guidance recommends 5 to 10 participants per group and commonly cites 6 to 8 as the optimal size for sustained, rich interaction (Akyıldız and Ahmed, 2021). Trained assistants facilitated each group, with one serving as moderator and the other as a note-taker, a task division consistent with standard focus group practice (Krueger, 2014). The moderator used the interview guide to guide the discussion, using probes and follow-up questions as needed (Kallio et al., 2016). Sessions began with orientation, ground rules, and encouragement to use preferred languages (Temple and Young, 2004). Flip chart papers and coloured marker pens were used to list and clarify key discussion points and to support collective reflection (Morgan, 1997). Each FGD took approximately one hour. The moderator managed participation through numbered turn-taking and gauged agreement by a show of hands. After each focus group discussion, a district plenary was held where the moderator summarised key points and participants confirmed, corrected, or expanded them.

Individual interviews mirrored the group discussion topics and were conducted at locations chosen by the respondents. Research assistants used interview guides. They conducted one-on-one interviews, taking detailed notebook records and audio recordings of speech, with consent to strengthen completeness for later analysis (Tessier, 2012). During analysis, recordings were replayed to deepen familiarisation with the dataset, a foundational step in reflective thematic qualitative analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Interviews continued until saturation, defined as the point at which additional interviews yielded no new themes relevant to the study objectives (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink et al., 2016; Saunders et al., 2018). Saturation was reached at 16 interviews in Kapchorwa, 16 in Manafwa, and the study conducted 16 interviews in Namisindwa to maintain comparable coverage across districts.

Each interview lasted about 40 minutes. During interviews, the interviewer paraphrased responses and used probes to verify meaning and clarify interpretations, reducing misinterpretation and strengthening credibility. Given my background in extension in Uganda, I mitigated bias

through trained interviewers, consistent guides, triangulation across methods, reflexive memoing, and transparent coding.

### Data analysis

After data collection, all group discussions and interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed in MAXQDA 10 using reflective thematic analysis (RTA). RTA is an interpretive approach in which themes are generated through active engagement with the dataset rather than treated as objectively extracted from it (Braun and Clarke, 2019, 2006). This approach suited the study because it is theoretically flexible and aligned with its focus on learning pathways, evolving value chain roles, collective actions, and the dynamics of trust, recognition, and contestation. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase process, with phases modified as needed (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Kiger and Varpio, 2020).

First, the transcripts were read and re-read to facilitate familiarisation, with initial analytic observations recorded in memos.

Second, the full data set was coded, allowing multiple codes to be applied to a single segment. For example, one excerpt could be coded as peer exchange as a learning mechanism and recognition as a social process.

Third, related codes were clustered to develop candidate themes rather than grouped under generic topic headings. Fourth, the candidate themes were reviewed against coded extracts and then against the full dataset to check for internal coherence and external distinctiveness from other themes.

Fifth, the themes were refined, delimited, and named, with attention to each theme's central organising concept, boundaries, and any required sub-theme, while avoiding unnecessary fragmentation. Finally, the findings were written as a narrative, with analytical claims supporting illustrative quotations drawn from both focus groups and individual interviews.

### RESULTS

This section presents findings from focus group discussions (FGDs) and individual interviews (IDIs) with coffee innovation platform smallholder farmers in the Kapchorwa, Manafwa, and Namisindwa districts. The findings show that farmers' roles in the coffee value chain expanded through learning within group settings and recognition by peers, the wider communities, and external stakeholders.

**Role change was collective and socially confirmed**

Farmers who participated in FGDs reported moving beyond selling cherries to buying, marketing, and, in some cases, processing. The shift was experienced more as a collective movement rather than an individual effort:

Before, we were just farmers selling cherries. Now we are traders and marketers, and we are even considering processing (FGD, Kapchorwa).

This was supported by individual interviews, which highlighted that role change was heavily influenced by how other people in the community addressed the individual. For example, an interviewee from Namisindwa was identified as a buyer, even after continuing to grow their own coffee:

Most people now refer to me as a coffee buyer; some do not even know that I still grow coffee (IDI, Namisindwa District).

This suggests role expansion is not only about taking on tasks. It is also about being socially recognized as someone who can act on behalf of others.

**Learning pathways were practical and peer-based**

Farmers link role expansion to learning through peers and to repeated practice within groups. In focus groups, they described learning through peer exchange, group activities, demonstrations, and training linked to innovation platforms activities.

We learn from each other; it is sharing, not one person teaching (FGD, Namisindwa District).

In individual interviews, participants connect training and hands-on practice with being sought out for work, thereby reinforcing their position in the value chain. One trained coffee picker described how skills translated into requests from others.

After the training, I became a professional picker. People now hire me because I know how to pick properly (IDI, Kapchorwa). Other respondents linked exchange visits, observations, and training to improved ability to trade, coordinate bulking, or engage in early processing activities (IDI, Manafwa).

Learning served as both capacity-building and public proof of competence, which set the stage for the next theme of recognition.

**Recognition increased trust but also created obligations**

Participants consistently reported that being seen as knowledgeable about coffee activities increased others' respect. As one FGD participant from Manafwa explained:

People respect us now because they see we know what we are doing (FGD, Manafwa District).

But recognition also increased demand. Interviewees described being asked for money, advice, or support because others assumed they had resources or access:

Because they see me as successful, people come to borrow money or ask for help (IDI, Namisindwa). Some also described their expectations of training others after attending project training (IDI, Kapchorwa).

Recognition also carried social risk. Some participants experienced suspicion, jealousy, or disputes, especially when they held leadership or facilitation roles. One respondent in Manafwa stepped back from facilitation after facing questions about their conduct and intentions (IDI, Manafwa).

So, recognition stabilised roles through trust, but it also raised the cost of staying visible.

**Farmer groups enabled marketing actions and leadership roles, but also generated conflict**

Farmers described groups and innovation platforms as essential for collective marketing, bulking, and negotiating with buyers. Groups increased their bargaining power and made farmers' voices harder to ignore. One participant from Kapchorwa summarised the sentiment:

Alone, you cannot manage; together, we have a voice (FGD, Kapchorwa).

Interviewees in formal roles such as secretary or coordinator described themselves as coordination nodes who were relied on for information and coordination:

As secretary, people expect information from me first, then I share it with others (IDI, Namisindwa).

Yet the same group structures also created conflict over leadership, rule enforcement, and benefit sharing. This links back to recognition and fairness. The more visible the role, the more contested it became.

**Links to institutions and buyers strengthened credibility in new roles**

Across focus groups and interviews, farmers described universities, extension services, NGOs, buyers, and government stakeholders as providing training, markets, and visibility:

Through the project, we are now known to buyers and organisations (FGD, Namisindwa).

Interviewees also said that being trained or supervised increased community trust in their products and services:

People trust my seedlings because they know I was trained and supervised (IDI, Manafwa).

These external linkages acted as credibility signals that supported legitimacy at the local level.

**Further upgrading was widely desired but constrained by resources and market conditions.**

Many farmers expressed ambitions to move into value addition, processing, and higher-level marketing:

We are not stopping here; we want to go higher in the coffee business (FGD, Kapchorwa).

Interviews linked these plans to improve market knowledge and contacts gained through the platform:

Now that I know the market and have contacts, I want to move into value addition (IDI, Namisindwa).

However, constraints were persistent: limited capital, land pressures, and market volatility. Some preferred to consolidate current gains rather than take on additional risks. This helps to explain why the role expansion was uneven and why some farmers stepped back even when opportunities existed.

**DISCUSSION**

This study set out to explain how innovation platforms support coffee farmers to move beyond production into additional value chain roles. The findings point to three interlinked mechanisms: social learning that builds competence others can observe, recognition that stabilises or destabilises new roles through legitimacy, and collective action that enables market participation while also creating governance risks. Institutional linkages amplify these mechanisms, and structural and social constraints limit how far upgrading can proceed.

**Learning on platforms supports role expansion by demonstrating the competence others can see.**

Farmers did not describe learning as a simple knowledge transfer. They emphasised repeated practice, feedback, and problem-solving tied to concrete tasks such as professional picking, buying, mobilising, marketing, and processing. In this sense, platform learning build role capacity, not just practice change. This aligns with extension scholars arguing for a networked learning and facilitation rather than one-way delivery of advice (Birner et al., 2009; Kelly et al., 2017; Lubell and McRoberts, 2018). It is also consistent with the innovation platforms research, which shows that outcomes depend less on training attendance and more on whether the

platform provides opportunities for repeated interaction, experimentation, and coordination (Schut et al., 2016). If extension programs want farmers to move into market-facing roles, they need to support continuous, peer-visible, task-oriented learning throughout the chain. One-off training rarely stabilises a new role unless farmers can demonstrate competence to peers and buyers through practice.

**Recognition and legitimacy shaped whether new roles were sustained.**

Once competence became visible, farmers were treated as buyers, coordinators, and advisors, which increased trust in their services. However, recognition also created costs, including rising demands for help and pressures on credibility (Onyas et al., 2018). It helps to separate recognition, which comes from specific audiences through concrete acts, from legitimacy, which is the broader judgment that a role is appropriate and trustworthy within local norms (Bennet, 2019; Suchman, 1995). In my data, recognition often served as the trigger, while legitimacy determined whether the role felt safe to sustain (Opola et al., 2023). When legitimacy was contested, farmers often stepped back from visible roles to mitigate reputational risk. This exposes an extension blind spot: skills do not automatically translate into upgrading without social approval and active management of moral risk (Audouin, 2014).

**Collective action enabled market participation while amplifying leadership tensions.**

Farmers always described role change as a collective effort that enabled bulk buying and a stronger voice with buyers. However, group action also produced internal disputes over leadership, rule enforcement, and benefit distribution (Magala et al., 2018; Sartas et al., 2019). This matches evidence that marketing gains through collective action depend on strict coordination and enforcement, and that side selling can quickly damage these fragile relationships (Kaganzi et al., 2009; Markelova et al., 2009). When governance is weak, farmers may withdraw from roles that expose them to blame or accusations. Collective action expands opportunity, but it also increases the social cost of failure (Hill et al., 2021).

**Institutional linkages increased credibility and widened opportunity structures.**

Links to universities, non-governmental organisations, extension services, and buyers increased farmers'

credibility, reflecting extension arguments that legitimacy often flows through networks rather than single agencies (Chowdhury and Kabir, 2024; Faure et al., 2016). This link also shaped who had access to training, markets, and visibility, which, in turn, affected recognition and role stability. Nevertheless, there is a distributional tension worth noting: When projects repeatedly select specific individuals for exposure, they may concentrate symbolic capital and deepen local hierarchies of opportunity (Hermans et al., 2017; Sartas, 2018).

### **Upgrading remained aspirational and constrained, even with learning and recognition.**

Aspirations for value addition were often constrained by limited capital, land pressure, and market instability (Onyas et al., 2018). This aligns with evidence indicating that market-based upgrading trajectories are structurally conditioned, and that market schemes such as certification can yield mixed outcomes depending on participation conditions (Akoyi and Maertens, 2018, 2016; Chiputwa et al., 2015). Constraints were also social. Brokerage roles can be morally risky, so some farmers avoided visibility even when they possessed the necessary skills (Opola et al., 2023).

### **CONCLUSION**

This study examined how coffee innovation platforms in Eastern Uganda supported smallholders in expanding their roles beyond production, and why some of these roles were sustained while others were dropped. The findings indicate that role expansion was not merely a technical shift. It was a social process that depended on learning, recognition, and legitimacy within groups and across wider value-chain relationships.

First, platform participation supported role expansion through repeated, practical learning. Farmers described learning through peer exchange, training linked to real tasks, observation, and hands-on learning. This produced competence that other people could see. This visibility helped farmers take on roles such as buying, marketing, coordination, and service provision. Learning built capacity, but capacity alone did not guarantee sustained role performance.

Second, recognition and legitimacy shaped role retention. When farmers performed well, peers, communities, and external stakeholders began to recognise them as buyers, coordinators, or advisors. Recognition increased trust and opened market opportunities, but it also created obligations and pressure. Some farmers faced moral

scrutiny, jealousy, and suspicion, especially when money, leadership, or brokerage were involved. When legitimacy was contested, some farmers withdrew from visible roles to reduce reputational risk.

Third, collective action enabled market participation but intensified governance demands. Groups supported bulking, bargaining, and compliance with buyer requirements. At the same time, group actions generated tensions over benefit sharing and rule enforcement, which could undermine trust and role stability. Moreover, institutional linkages also mattered. Links to NGOs, extension services, and buyers increased credibility and access to services. However, they sometimes concentrated opportunities among those who were already more visible or better connected, which can deepen inequality within platforms.

### **Implications**

For extension practice and policy, the following implications are clear, though often neglected in program design and implementation.

District extension leadership, led by the District Production Officer, or equivalent, should strengthen the selection, mandate, and supervision of farmer intermediaries. Legitimacy is a social process, but it becomes durable when intermediary roles are anchored in clear rules and routine oversight (Schut et al., 2016). The selection procedure should prevent lead farmers from becoming unaccountable gatekeepers and should keep roles functional even when external projects end. Use transparent criteria to communicate locally, set clear role boundaries, require simple reporting, and provide accessible feedback and grievance channels. Uganda's national extension guidelines already recognise farmer trainers/intermediaries and community-based facilitators, which creates room to tighten role design and supervision rather than inventing new categories (MAAIF/DAES, 2016).

National extension system designers and implementing partners should budget for workload sharing, protection, and backstopping, in addition to technical training. Evidence indicates that intermediary performance depends on their capacity and motivation; barriers include time burdens, mobility costs, competing responsibilities, and weak linkages to formal services (Kiptot and Franzel, 2015). To prevent hidden barriers such as burnout, indebtedness, and local tensions when expectations exceed support, programs should set limits on trainers' workloads, schedule refresher training, reimburse travel and

communication expenses, and connect intermediaries to government extension staff for technical backstopping.

Program managers across public, private and NGOs should test legitimacy while monitoring unintended status and power effects. Simple credibility cues can help farmers accept new intermediary roles, but they can also concentrate authority. Treat legitimacy tools as a package: pair public recognition with accountability. Use measures such as time bound appointments, role rotation, peer oversight, transaction documentation, and clear limits on who can handle money or make binding decisions. Where programs pilot legitimacy cues, they should assess diffusion and equity outcomes, not only uptake (Lukuyu et al., 2012). Boards of cooperative societies and non-governmental organisations should treat internal rules, dispute resolution, and transparency as core components of extension infrastructure. Farmer organisations can deliver extension services, but weak governance capacity, especially when imposed externally, often undermines performance and legitimacy (Bingen and Simpson, 2015). To reduce elite capture of training opportunities, inputs, and market access, include governance coaching on elections, financial reporting, and transparency rules, sanctions, and dispute resolution alongside agronomy and post-harvest content.

Coffee value chain stakeholders, such as farmers, input suppliers, traders, and processors, should provide support based on verified participation and benefit incidence rather than certification status alone. Uganda's evidence suggests that returns vary by context, crop type, and the form of integration, and certification does not automatically solve equity problems (Ssebunya et al., 2019). Programs should invest in group-level commercialisation capacity, including aggregation systems, quality control, contract readiness, and negotiation skills. They should also monitor benefit distribution by membership duration and role position, because longer membership and greater visibility can translate into disproportionate access to opportunities.

Buyers and sustainability programs should budget explicitly for compliance and coordination costs that are typically carried by local intermediaries. Evidence from Uganda indicates that income gains from contract farming depend on the effectiveness of organisation, monitoring, and management of compliance tasks inside groups, often overseen by farmer intermediaries (Bolwig et al., 2009). To prevent unpaid local administration, budget for internal systems and compensate group administrators where they carry substantial documentation and inspection prevention

work. Monitoring should specify who is responsible for record keeping, inspection readiness, grievance handling, and conflict resolution, and it should verify that these tasks do not quietly shift to a few individuals without support.

Platform facilitators and monitoring teams should treat network formation as a management issue, not a background social process. Early implementation can centralise participation, amplify the influence of lead organisations, and push some stakeholders out (Sartas et al., 2018). Evidence from multi-stakeholder platforms in Central and West African also shows persistent underrepresentation of certain stakeholder types and mismatches between who shares knowledge and who holds influence (Hermans et al., 2017). Programs should therefore monitor who becomes central or peripheral early, then correct courses through targeted outreach to missing stakeholders, creation of bridging roles, and adjustment of participation rule. Adding periodic social network mapping and role recognition tracking makes it easier to detect concentration of legitimacy before it becomes entrenched.

#### **Limitations and future research**

Qualitative case study research design is the best fit for exploring these relationships, as it describes patterns and mechanisms rather than prevalence. Future studies could use network mapping to examine inclusivity on the platform (Hermans et al., 2017; Sartas et al., 2018), a longitudinal approach to track changes in recognition and role stability over time, or mixed methods to evaluate reforms in advisory roles (Benin et al., 2011). Comparing the recognition patterns of platform participants and non-participants within the same communities may reveal whether recognition patterns are unique to the platform or reflect broader coffee social realities.

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