

THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENTS IN ENHANCING NGO PROGRAMS FOR POVERTY REDUCTION IN RWANDA: A CASE OF CARITAS RWANDA

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Abstract: This study examined the role of international partnerships and diplomatic engagements in enhancing NGO programs for poverty reduction in Rwanda, focusing on Caritas Rwanda. The study adopted a mixed-method design integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Primary and secondary data were used to assess how collaborations with international partners, donor agencies, and diplomatic missions influence the efficiency, sustainability, and scalability of poverty reduction initiatives implemented by Caritas. A sample of 100 respondents, including Caritas staff, local beneficiaries, and partner representatives, was selected using purposive and random sampling. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics with SPSS (version 26). Findings revealed a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.812^{**}$) between international partnerships and the effectiveness of poverty reduction programs. Qualitative analysis further indicated that diplomatic engagements facilitate knowledge transfer, capacity building, and advocacy for policy reforms supportive of NGO operations. The study concluded that international collaborations significantly enhance NGO program sustainability and recommended that Caritas strengthen partnership management, improve donor communication strategies, and align its initiatives with Rwanda's Vision 2050 development framework.

Keywords: International partnerships, Diplomatic engagement, Poverty reduction, NGO programs, Caritas Rwanda, Development cooperation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are vital actors in the global development landscape, especially in developing countries where they complement government efforts in addressing poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. Over the past decades, NGOs have evolved from charity-based entities to strategic development partners implementing projects that promote community empowerment, economic inclusion, and human development (Lewis & Kanji, 2021). In Rwanda, NGOs play an increasingly significant role in fostering socio-economic transformation, particularly in rural areas where access to public resources remains limited. Among these, Caritas Rwanda, a faith-based organization established under the Catholic Church, has been at the forefront of implementing poverty reduction programs through humanitarian assistance, social protection, agricultural development, health promotion, and education support.

Despite the achievements made, the growing complexity of global development challenges such as climate change, economic inequality, and post-conflict reconstruction necessitates strengthened collaboration between local NGOs and international development partners. Global partnerships and diplomatic engagements enable local organizations like Caritas to mobilize financial resources, access technical expertise, and benefit from knowledge exchange that enhances project effectiveness and sustainability (OECD, 2022). International partnerships are not merely funding relationships; they also serve as platforms for institutional learning, policy dialogue, and advocacy, which are essential for achieving long-term poverty reduction goals. Through such collaborations, Caritas Rwanda aligns its programs with the broader international development agenda, notably the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

According to UNDP (2023), effective partnerships between local NGOs and international stakeholders foster sustainability by promoting mutual accountability, transparency, and alignment of objectives. These partnerships also allow NGOs to leverage diplomatic networks for policy influence, which is crucial in shaping national frameworks that support inclusive development. For example, Caritas Rwanda's collaboration with Caritas Internationalis, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), and the European Union (EU) has strengthened its operational capacity to implement livelihood improvement projects, community health initiatives, and disaster response programs. Such collaborations are further reinforced by diplomatic engagements with embassies and development agencies that facilitate dialogue on governance, humanitarian aid, and policy coherence in line with Rwanda's Vision 2050.

However, challenges persist in maintaining balanced partnerships. Some NGOs face dependency on external funding, limited negotiation capacity, and disparities in decision-making power between local and international actors (Dupont & Muriithi, 2020). These issues can influence the effectiveness and sustainability of NGO programs, particularly when donor priorities diverge from local needs. For Caritas Rwanda, diplomatic cooperation and strong partnerships are therefore essential in navigating these challenges by building mutual trust, ensuring ownership of interventions, and fostering alignment with Rwanda's national development priorities.

The Rwandan government has also recognized the strategic importance of partnerships in development. Through institutions such as the Rwanda Governance Board (RGB) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, the state promotes an enabling environment for NGO-donor collaboration, policy advocacy, and effective resource utilization. This institutional framework supports organizations like Caritas in coordinating with international partners to deliver measurable results in poverty reduction.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the role of international partnerships and diplomatic engagements in enhancing NGO programs for poverty reduction in Rwanda, with a particular focus on Caritas Rwanda. The study seeks to assess how these collaborations influence program design, implementation, and sustainability, as well as to identify opportunities and challenges in strengthening international cooperation for long-term poverty alleviation. By analyzing these relationships, the study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on partnership-driven development and provides evidence-based recommendations for improving NGO effectiveness in Rwanda and beyond.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a mixed-method research design integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the effects of international partnerships and diplomatic engagements in enhancing NGO programs for poverty reduction in Rwanda, with Caritas Rwanda as the case study. The combination of the two methods enabled triangulation of findings, ensuring reliability and depth in the interpretation of results. The quantitative component provided measurable evidence on the relationship between international collaborations and poverty reduction outcomes, while the qualitative aspect offered in-depth insights into stakeholder experiences, partnership dynamics, and programmatic challenges. Both datasets were analyzed independently using appropriate methods and later synthesized for a holistic conclusion.

The study was conducted in Kigali City and three districts Huye, Nyagatare, and Musanze where Caritas Rwanda implements major poverty reduction projects in collaboration with international partners. These districts were purposively selected because they represent different socio-economic zones and host flagship initiatives such as livelihood improvement, agriculture support, health outreach, and social protection. The Caritas Rwanda headquarters in Kigali City served as the administrative focal point for data collection, given its coordination role with Caritas Internationalis and donor

agencies like the European Union (EU), Catholic Relief Services (CRS), and the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ). The diversity of these sites provided rich information on how international partnerships and diplomatic engagements contribute to project implementation and sustainability.

The target population comprised three main categories: Caritas Rwanda employees, beneficiaries of Caritas-supported programs, and representatives of international partner organizations. These groups were selected because of their direct or indirect involvement in partnership management and project execution. Caritas staff provided institutional perspectives on program design and reporting processes; beneficiaries offered experiential insights on the impact of these interventions on their livelihoods; while international partners and diplomatic representatives contributed viewpoints on collaboration frameworks and donor relations.

Category of Respondents	Population
Caritas Rwanda Staff	40
Project Beneficiaries	120
International Partners (Donor Reps)	20
Total	180

Source: Caritas Rwanda (2025)

Sample Size Determination

According to Creswell (2014), a sample size represents a subset of the population from which inferences about the entire population are drawn. The sample size for this study was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula with a 5% margin of error:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:

n = required sample size

N = total population (180)

e = margin of error (0.05)

$$n = \frac{180}{1 + 180(0.05)^2} = \frac{180}{1.45} = 124.1 \approx 124$$

Therefore, the study sample comprised 124 respondents distributed proportionately across the target groups.

Category of Respondents	Study Population	Sample Size
Caritas Rwanda Staff	40	28
Project Beneficiaries	120	83
International Partners (Donor Reps)	20	13
Total	180	124

Source: Caritas Rwanda (2025)

Sampling Techniques

The study employed both simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques to ensure inclusivity and accuracy. Simple random sampling was applied to beneficiaries to avoid bias and ensure each participant had an equal chance of selection. Purposive sampling was used for Caritas staff and international partner representatives based on their roles and expertise in partnership coordination, program implementation, and donor engagement. This combination of techniques enhanced the validity and reliability of collected data by balancing representativeness and expert insights.

Data were gathered using two main tools: a structured questionnaire and an interview guide. The questionnaire was administered to Caritas staff and program beneficiaries to capture quantitative data on the perceived influence of international partnerships on poverty reduction outcomes, project sustainability, and community empowerment.

The interview guide was used to collect qualitative data from international partners, diplomatic representatives, and senior Caritas officials. These interviews explored themes such as partnership governance, policy advocacy, donor coordination, and alignment with Rwanda's Vision 2050 and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

To ensure consistency, all data collection instruments were pre-tested during a pilot study in Kigali City. Feedback from the pilot was used to refine the tools for clarity and relevance. The research assistants were trained to administer questionnaires objectively and record responses accurately.

Quantitative data were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS Version 26) for analysis. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and means were used to summarize demographic characteristics and key variables. Inferential statistics, particularly Pearson correlation analysis, were used to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between international partnerships and poverty reduction performance indicators. Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, coded, and categorized into major themes reflecting collaboration outcomes, challenges, and best practices. Cross-case analysis was then conducted to identify common patterns and divergent perspectives among stakeholders.

To ensure reliability, the instruments were pre-tested, and ambiguous questions were revised. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was computed for key variables, yielding an overall reliability index of 0.87, indicating high internal consistency. Validity was achieved through expert review by research supervisors and Caritas program managers, ensuring that the instruments measured what they intended to. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings also enhanced the credibility of the results.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Mount Kenya University Research and Ethics Committee (MKU-REC). The study adhered to principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and informed consent. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, and participation was entirely voluntary. Data confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing all participant identities. The research also observed cultural sensitivity and respect for institutional protocols during data collection at Caritas Rwanda offices and field sites.

III. RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

In order to establish a statistical foundation for the research findings, the study first examined the demographic characteristics of respondents that were relevant to their participation in the study. These characteristics included age, gender, educational level, and work experience. Understanding the demographics of respondents provided valuable insights into their level of experience and engagement with Caritas Rwanda's international partnership programs.

Age Group of Respondents

Age Group	Frequency	Percent
18–29	15	12.1
30–44	62	50.0
45–60	35	28.2
Above 60	12	9.7
Total	124	100.0

Source: Primary data (2025)

The table above presents the distribution of respondents by age group. Out of 124 respondents, 12.1% were aged between 18 and 29 years, 50% between 30 and 44 years, 28.2% between 45 and 60 years, and 9.7% were above 60 years. The results indicate that the majority of participants were mature adults aged 30–44 years, suggesting a relatively experienced and knowledgeable group capable of providing informed views on Caritas Rwanda's partnership initiatives.

Gender of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	69	55.6
Female	55	44.4
Total	124	100.0

Source: Primary data (2025)

The gender distribution shows that 55.6% of respondents were male and 44.4% were female. This balance reflects Caritas Rwanda's gender-inclusive approach to both staffing and beneficiary engagement, aligning with its gender equality and empowerment strategies.

Educational Level of Respondents

Educational Level	Frequency	Percent
Secondary Education	25	20.2
Vocational Training	36	29.0
University Degree or Higher	63	50.8
Total	124	100.0

Source: Primary data (2025)

The educational background of respondents indicates that most participants (50.8%) possessed a university degree or higher qualification, 29.0% had vocational training, and 20.2% had attained secondary education. This distribution highlights that the majority of respondents had sufficient educational exposure to understand and evaluate NGO partnership mechanisms, reporting standards, and development processes.

Work Experience of Respondents

Work Experience	Frequency	Percent
Less than 1 year	8	6.5
1–5 years	47	37.9
6–10 years	41	33.1
Above 10 years	28	22.6
Total	124	100.0

Source: Primary data (2025)

The results show that 37.9% of respondents had worked with Caritas or partner institutions for between 1–5 years, 33.1% had 6–10 years of experience, and 22.6% had over 10 years of professional engagement. This demonstrates a well-diversified sample with both experienced and newer participants, providing a balanced perspective on partnership performance and sustainability.

Presentation of Findings

The main objective of this study was to examine the effects of international partnerships and diplomatic engagements on the effectiveness and sustainability of Caritas Rwanda's poverty reduction programs. Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed to evaluate how such partnerships influence operational performance, funding access, innovation, and policy advocacy.

Influence of International Partnerships on Caritas Rwanda's Poverty Reduction Programs

Statement	SD (%)	D (%)	NS (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	SD
Partnerships with international donors enhance Caritas' program sustainability	2	6	8	36	48	4.22	0.61
Diplomatic engagements promote advocacy and policy influence	2	5	7	34	52	4.29	0.58
Cross-border collaborations increase access to funding opportunities	3	5	6	42	44	4.19	0.67
International partnerships enhance capacity building and staff training	1	4	7	38	50	4.33	0.53
Diplomatic relations foster innovation in poverty reduction initiatives	2	4	8	40	46	4.26	0.59
Overall Mean						4.26	0.60

Source: Primary data (2025)

The results in the above table illustrate that the majority of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with all the statements presented. Specifically, 84% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that international partnerships enhance the sustainability of Caritas programs, while 86% confirmed that diplomatic engagements promote advocacy and policy influence. Similarly, 86% recognized that cross-border collaborations provide greater access to funding opportunities, and 88% acknowledged that partnerships improve staff capacity building and innovation in program delivery.

The overall mean score of 4.26 (on a five-point Likert scale) suggests a highly positive perception among respondents regarding the contribution of international partnerships and diplomatic engagements to Caritas Rwanda's poverty reduction initiatives. The low standard deviation (0.60) across variables indicates consistent responses among participants, demonstrating a shared recognition of the value added by external collaborations.

To further determine the relationship between international partnerships and poverty reduction outcomes, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted using SPSS (version 26). The results revealed a strong positive and statistically significant correlation ($r = 0.812, p < 0.01$)** between international partnerships and the effectiveness of Caritas Rwanda's poverty reduction programs.** This implies that as partnership engagement and diplomatic cooperation increase, so does program sustainability, efficiency, and community impact.

In addition to quantitative findings, qualitative data from key informant interviews reinforced these results. Respondents from Caritas Rwanda and its partner agencies emphasized that collaboration with international organizations has enhanced the institution's visibility, accountability, and access to technical support. Beneficiaries also noted improvements in livelihood programs and greater community empowerment due to the joint implementation strategies adopted through partnerships.

Overall, the findings suggest that international partnerships and diplomatic engagements are critical enablers of NGO effectiveness in poverty reduction. They strengthen institutional frameworks, improve project design and funding mechanisms, and foster innovation and advocacy. These findings provide strong empirical support for the argument that collaborative development approaches yield more sustainable poverty reduction outcomes in Rwanda.

IV. DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research by Clark (2021), who emphasized that international partnerships improve the resource base and operational efficiency of local NGOs in sub-Saharan Africa. Similarly, Dupont and Muriithi (2020) found that diplomatic engagements create an enabling environment for NGOs to influence government policy and development planning. Caritas Rwanda's collaboration with entities such as Caritas Internationalis, UN agencies, and the European Union has enhanced project coordination, knowledge sharing, and financial accountability, leading to measurable poverty reduction outcomes. Furthermore, the results align with SDG 17, which underscores the importance of partnerships in achieving sustainable development. This study demonstrates that effective international engagement not only boosts funding but also strengthens institutional capacity, innovation, and cross-sector collaboration critical for poverty

reduction. However, challenges remain, including dependence on external funding, bureaucratic delays in diplomatic procedures, and occasional misalignment between donor priorities and local needs (World Bank, 2023). To mitigate these challenges, Caritas should prioritize strategic partnership management, enhance transparency, and localize program design to ensure long-term sustainability.

Clark (2021) assessed the impact of international collaborations on local NGO performance in sub-Saharan Africa and found that such partnerships significantly enhance the financial base, operational efficiency, and sustainability of development programs. This aligns with the current study's findings, where 84% of respondents agreed that international partnerships enhance Caritas Rwanda's program sustainability, while 86% affirmed that diplomatic engagements promote advocacy and policy influence. Similarly, 88% agreed that partnerships improve capacity building and staff training, strengthening institutional performance and innovation within Caritas projects.

Dupont and Muriithi (2020) observed that diplomatic engagements foster policy dialogue and collaboration between NGOs and government agencies, creating a favorable environment for development initiatives. The current study confirmed this, revealing that 86% of respondents believed that diplomatic relations enable Caritas to influence public policy and strengthen coordination with national authorities. This collaboration has been critical in improving service delivery and aligning Caritas' interventions with Rwanda's national poverty reduction priorities.

According to OECD (2022), international partnerships are a key driver for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 17 (SDG 17), which emphasizes global collaboration in sustainable development. The present findings support this argument, showing that 44% of respondents agreed and 42% strongly agreed that cross-border partnerships increase access to funding opportunities. Through its collaboration with organizations such as Caritas Internationalis, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), and the European Union (EU), Caritas Rwanda has expanded its resource base and secured long-term funding for poverty alleviation programs, particularly in rural communities.

The results also revealed that 86% of respondents agreed that diplomatic cooperation enhances innovation and facilitates the exchange of best practices in poverty reduction. This finding is consistent with UNDP (2023), which highlighted that international collaboration enables knowledge transfer, technology exchange, and shared learning—key components for effective development interventions. Respondents noted that Caritas' partnerships have contributed to the adoption of innovative livelihood models such as integrated farming systems, financial inclusion programs, and digital monitoring tools that ensure accountability and efficiency.

In addition, 88% of participants indicated that capacity building initiatives funded through partnerships have strengthened Caritas' human resource development and technical expertise. Similar results were reported by World Bank (2023), which found that NGOs supported through international collaboration demonstrate higher performance outcomes in training, monitoring, and evaluation systems. These improvements have translated into measurable progress in Caritas Rwanda's community development and poverty reduction efforts.

Despite these positive outcomes, a small proportion (14%) of respondents expressed reservations regarding full alignment between donor priorities and local needs. Some participants cited challenges such as bureaucratic delays in diplomatic procedures, overdependence on external funding, and occasional conditionalities tied to donor financing. These concerns resonate with findings by Davis and Leffers (2021), who argued that while international partnerships enhance NGO performance, they can also create structural dependence if not managed strategically.

Overall, the current study demonstrates that international partnerships and diplomatic engagements substantially enhance Caritas Rwanda's capacity to implement effective and sustainable poverty reduction programs. The findings confirm that collaboration with global partners improves access to funding, policy influence, and institutional innovation—key factors for successful poverty reduction. However, for long-term sustainability, Caritas should strengthen its strategic partnership management, enhance transparency, and promote greater localization of program design to ensure that donor-supported initiatives fully reflect community needs and national priorities.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concluded that international partnerships and diplomatic engagements significantly enhance the effectiveness of NGO poverty reduction programs in Rwanda. Through funding, capacity building, and advocacy, these collaborations empower Caritas Rwanda to design and implement sustainable interventions that align with national development goals.

The study recommends that Caritas strengthen its monitoring frameworks for partnership performance, diversify funding sources, and engage more actively in policy dialogues through diplomatic channels. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of partnership dynamics on NGO sustainability in the Rwandan context.

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