

## Community Currency; a Trigger to Community Development among the Urban Poor

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**Abstract:** Kenya is stratified into smaller administrative blocks known as counties, and managed by both national and county administrative staff. In Kwale County, a community currency used is known as “Sarafu-credit” which has transformed business operation among the small scale traders, moreover, community currency is believed to stabilize the money supply in a local community. In this work, we sought to investigate the impact of “Sarafu-credit” as a community currency. The study adopted a mixed approach method, focussed group discussion and key informant interviews to interactively unravel the realities on the ground for opportunity of exploring the potential role of community currencies in poverty reduction and spurring economic growth within the communities. The study found that Sarafu-credit is widely accepted within the community, with over 80% level of acceptance. Moreover, adoption of Sarafu-credit improved the social structures and the support systems among the members of the community, and by extension increased the happiness index. Financial stability was enhanced through community currency, due to inter and intra-trading among the traders. Based on the findings, boosting the livelihood of the marginalized members of society can be accelerated through widespread use of complimentary currencies such as “Sarafu-credit”

**Keywords:** Community currency; Sarafu-credit; Kwale County; Focused Group Discussion (FGD); Key informant interviews (KII)

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### I. Introduction

Community currencies (CC) are complementary forms of money in which the users voluntarily agree to accept alongside a national or supranational legal currency [1]. In Kwale county Kenya, a commonly used community currency is known as “Sarafu-credit”, while in other parts of the country, various forms of community currencies are in use [2]. The adoption of CC creates a type of currency system that complements the official currency, and mainly developed by a group of agents, including but not limited to individuals, economic and social structures, local authorities or banks [3]. The CC acts as the basic tool for local economic development, a vehicles for community building, and social capital creation as well as strategies to advance ideological goals such as localism and de-growth [4]. Furthermore, the adoption of CC in a given community enhance a local network which aids in the regulation of exchanges for goods and services [5]. The creation and use of these systems tend to increase during economic downturns, when the exchange of goods and services in an official currency contracts, moreover, the complementary currencies provide an additional means of exchange [6]. From a functionalist theoretical viewpoint, CCSs are alternative forms of money, which fulfill the main functions of the latter by acting as a medium of exchange and unit of account within a defined geographic region or community, and in many cases also acts as a store of value [7].

The CCs lay the foundations for building stronger local and regional communities, which are more resilient and capable of better absorbance to the effects of financial crises [8]. Globally CC has been implemented in various countries, as both physical and digital currencies, which is issued and regulated by the creators, used and accepted by a particular group or community [9]. So far there over six thousand community currencies around the world, which are basically grouped into local, proprietary, commons and cyber [10]. In Kenya, CCs such as bangla pesa [11], miyani pesa, ecopesa, Sarafu-credit, and the recently developed Maendeleo trading credit have emerged. These CCs have enabled communities to be more effective in promoting social welfare, efficient asset use and promotion of the local businesses [7]. The upsurge in the community currencies within the country could be a pointer to their ripple effect in boosting the economy and

thereby ease of trade among the local community members. In this research, the researchers sought to investigate challenges and opportunities attributed to community currency systems in Kwale county Kenya.

In Kenyan Sarafu-credit is a very well-researched community currency, especially in comparison to other currencies in the Global South [12]. Started in 2011 in an informal settlement in Kwale as the Bangla-Pesa, the community currency developed into the larger network of Sarafu-credit, which is a block chain based digital solution, similar to mobile money [13]. Sarafu-credit has slowly gained popularity and it is intensely used by about 4065 members, with over 40,000 business transactions per year. The community members within the Sarafu-credit credit network, are poor and predominantly female, with the least access to formal financial institutions, which impedes their access to formal credits [14]. In order to elucidate the possible effects of community currencies, a survey was carried out to unearth the possible challenges and opportunities, and to determine the trends and community perception to the universal adaption of Sarafu-credit among the communities in Kwale County. The quantitative and qualitative generated, will play a critical role in policy revisions, and planning purpose geared towards successful implementation for future community currencies.

## **II. Materials and Methods**

The Materials and Methods should be described with sufficient details to allow others to replicate and build on the published results. Please note that the publication of your manuscript implicates that you must make all materials, data, computer code, and protocols associated with the publication available to readers. Please disclose at the submission stage any restrictions on the availability of materials or information. New methods and protocols should be described in detail while well-established methods can be briefly described and appropriately cited.

Research manuscripts reporting large datasets that are deposited in a publicly available database should specify where the data have been deposited and provide the relevant accession numbers. If the accession numbers have not yet been obtained at the time of submission, please state that they will be provided during review. They must be provided prior to publication.

Interventionary studies involving animals or humans, and other studies that require ethical approval, must list the authority that provided approval and the corresponding ethical approval code.

## **III. Results**

Qualitative case study was adopted in carrying out this research [15]. By definition, qualitative case study is a research methodology that helps in the exploration of a phenomenon within some particular context through various data sources, and it undertakes the exploration through a variety of lenses in order to reveal multiple facets of the phenomenon [15]. On the other hand, Yin ([16]) defines case study as an empirical research activity that, by using versatile empirical material gathered in several different ways, examines a specific present-day event or action in a bounded environment. The case study was relevant for this study because it helped to explore the challenges of using the “Sarafu-credit” community currency in the coastal region of Kenya.

### *2.1 Study area*

Kwale county is located on the coastal region of Kenya (4.1816<sup>0</sup>S, 39.4606<sup>0</sup> E), it has a total population of 866,820 as per the 2019 population census [17]. The region is predominantly occupied mijikenda ethnic group, who are involved in various economic activities, such as farming, tourism, quarrying of construction materials. The annual per capita of the Kwale residence is 100 million USD and thus the poverty rate stands at 36.1% [18]. The region is plagued by poor infrastructure, and thereby education standard is relatively low, which has been compounded by the cultural values. This study site was significant, being the very first rural region to implement community currency system in Kenya; moreover, there is wide use of Sarafu-credit in the region.

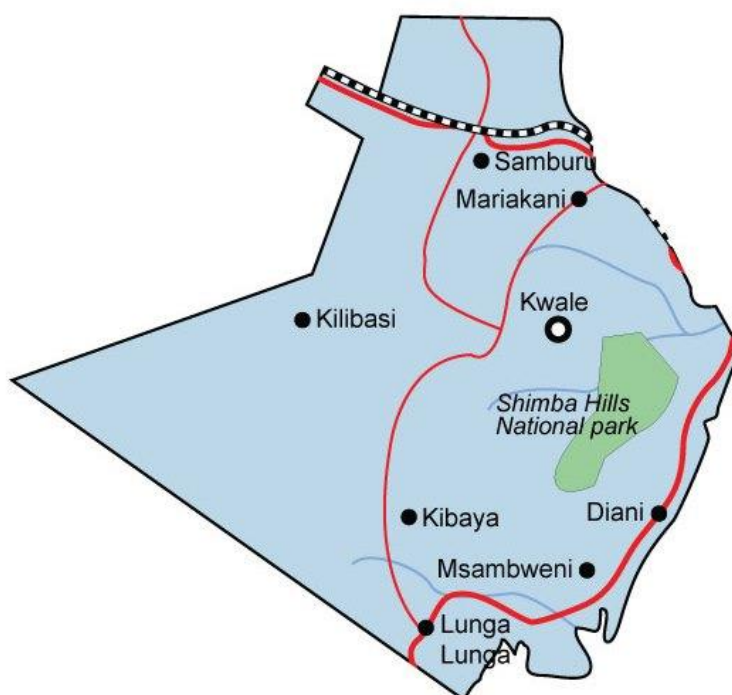


Figure 1. A map of Miani in Kwale County, adopted from Google images

### *2.2 Target population and Sampling methods/ technique*

In the study site, the entire population was approximately 2,500 people, and were stratified into five villages. The study adopted qualitative method involving semi-structured interviews [19]. Two focused group discussion (FGD) was formed, with six individuals were randomly drawn from the targeted community. Moreover, interviews were further conducted on individual basis, based on their roles within the community. The researcher also used observation guide as a toll for collecting qualitative data. The sample size was considered to be appropriate as described by Dworkin [20], for interviews, participants of between 6-30 are acceptable. Therefore, the research participants of the study were regarded to be sufficient for this study to help reach saturation during data collection.

### *2.3 Research Tools*

Interview guide for key informant interviews (KII) and FGD were used to collect data through interactive approach, while observation guide was used to intrusively collect observable information. Moreover, the use of interview is highly desirable for obtaining information based on emotions, feelings, experiences, sensitive issues, insider experience, privileged insights and experiences [21]. furthermore a “focused group consists of a small group of people, usually between six and nine in number, who are brought together by the researcher to explore attitudes and perceptions, feelings and ideas about a topic” [22]. A focus group interview provides a setting for the relatively homogeneous group to reflect on the questions asked by the interviewer. Interview was used to obtain qualitative data from the Founder of Grassroots Economics Foundation in Kenya. There were two FGDs with one being held with three participants at Miyani Food Distribution Point and another one being held with three participants (two teachers and the head teacher) at Ziواني Primary School.

### *2.4 Data Analysis*

Qualitative data from the interviews and the observation schedules were coded and analysed thematically. Thematic analysis was used in qualitative research and focused on examining themes within the data. The thematic analysis refers to the method of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns or themes within data and interpreting various aspects of the research topic [23]. This method emphasizes organization and rich description of the data set. The data were then interpreted by attaching significance to the themes and the patterns observed.

## **IV. Results and discussion**

### *3.1 Effects of the introduction of Sarafu--credit among the Kwale county residence*

Community currency emerged as a means to empower the economically marginalized [24], moreover, the community currencies are monetary projects carried out to fulfill development goals at the local level within the

a given community [25]. Therefore, we sought to investigate the effects of a commonly used community currency in the coastal region of Kenya known as the Sarafu-credit. Sarafu-credit was first introduced in Kwale county in 2013, through few and well-structured groupings, which were biased towards women organizations. Since its inception the community currency the forms have undergone radical transformation from physical money to digital currency. In order to determine the efficiency of community currency, a number of factors were considered, for instance, currency governance through taxation and levies by the business networks (CGTLBN); social support to business members in the community currency networks (SSBMCCN); social Innovations (SI); financial service innovations (FSI); and community networks (CN). Based on all the variables measured revealed high fidelity of over 80% with variability between 0.5 and 0.6 of the Likert scale (Table 1), an indication that the introduction of community currency had a positive effect on the lives of the community members

Table 1. Efficiency of community currency systems

Description	Low (%)	Neutral (%)	High (%)	Mean	SD
FSI	0	3.954802	96.0452	4.40113	0.566688
SI	0	4.519774	95.48023	4.350282	0.565497
CN	0	5.649718	94.35028	4.372881	0.590598
SSBMCCN	0	7.909605	92.0904	4.310734	0.611953
CGTLBN	0	22.59887	77.40113	3.937853	0.623026

The groups have grown from a single entity to over 80 groups and one can belong to more than a group. The group leaders and the local administrators were equipped with the knowledge and skills of managing the community currency, and through the local leaders, other community members were further trained, thus the entire communities were fully integrated and accepted the community currency. The nature in which the CC was introduced mirrored with other community currencies success stories in other regions, for instance in the United Kingdom, it has been found that the community currency has a positive effects on increased levels of community engagement and social participation leading to improved population health. Community currencies such as Timecredits are one way to support and encourage people to be more involved in their local community. As a result, they have attracted investment by local governments in the UK, with the hope of finding new ways to work with deprived communities, improve individual outcomes that lead to better health, and reduce the use of public services at a time of financial austerity [26].

In determining the financial sustainability as a result of community currency, Community Currency systems increases local trade among the small scale traders (ILT); Community Currency systems increases monthly return among small scale traders (IMR); Community Currency systems enhance Trust among small scale traders (ETAT); Community Currency increases security/ reduces crime within the communities where the small scale traders are (ISWC); Community Currency systems promotes Youth and women empowerment (PYWE); Community Currency systems promotes job creation (PJC); Community Currency systems promotes environmentally friendly activities (PEFA); Community Currency systems enhance access to health care services (EAHCS); Community Currency systems promotes literacy through increased school enrolment (PLISE); and Community Currency systems improves community livelihoods (ICL) were assessed.

The qualitative findings also indicated that the introduction of “Sarafu-credit” community currency had a positive effect on the saving culture among the members of the community (Figure 1). It was reported that many members of the community registered were able to have increased savings due to adoption and utilization of community currency. Finally, the qualitative findings from focus group discussions also indicated that the introduction of “Sarafu-credit” into the community made debt payments easier among the members of the community. This finding was in agreement to previous findings by Reppas and Muschert ([27]) which reported that there is room for optimism that complementary local currencies may ease negative aspects of traditional financial exchange by serving those on the fringes of and/or excluded from formal economies, and without necessarily competing with public or private traditional banking institutions. Similarly, Graugaard (2012), added that, community currencies can be used as a tool for building resilience and that Transition currencies in particular can strengthen sustainable consumption values and attitudes of its users. Moreover, Tichit (2017), reported that participants in the project associated the currency with social phenomena such as debt, poverty, there by departing from the idea that currency is neutral. The study concluded that Local currencies, through the different social representations of money they contain, could well be the drivers of societal change. Similarly, [28] reported that complementary local currencies seize upon ‘local’ aspects and diversify the system of monetary emission as a complement to that of the sovereign State.

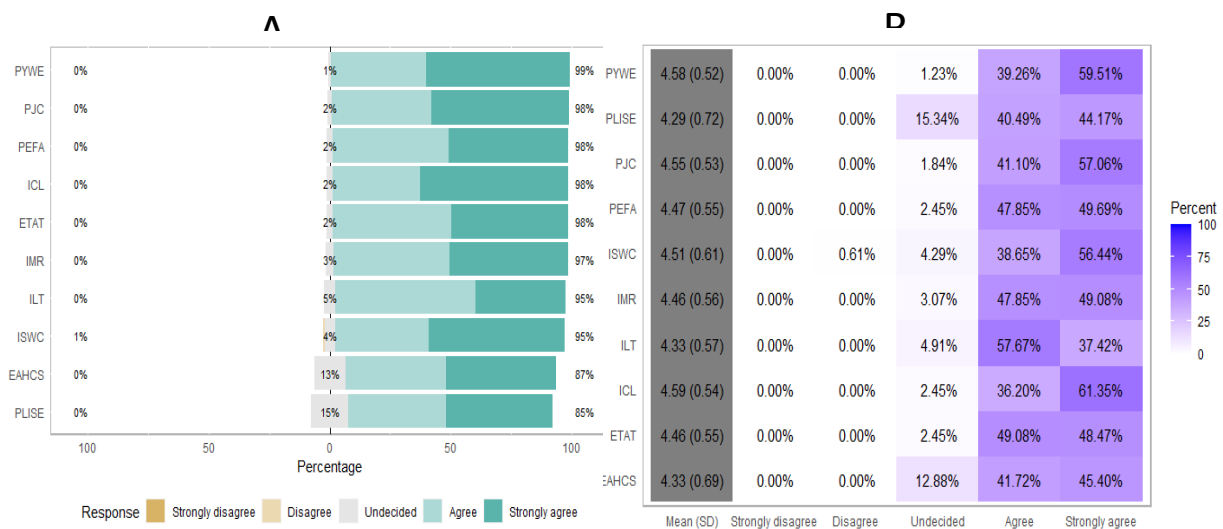


Figure 2. Financial sustainability. A. bar graph, B. Heatplot

### 3.2 Attitudes and perception of Sarafu--credit among the Kwale county population

Community currency is a grassroots, collective efforts to form an alternative market with the aim of empowering the economically marginalized and developing a social capital. Moreover, it is believed that the alternative forms of currencies emerged during the economic recessions of the last decade of the this century [29]. Based on the findings, 70% of the respondents agreed and acknowledged the presence of safaru-credit, 25% were partially aware and acknowledged the use of the community currency, while only 5% of the respondent had no knowledge about the safari-credit. The data obtained were in agreement with the previous findings in which the level of acceptance of the community currency stood at 80% [30]. The high acceptance showed that the community had a positive attitude towards the community currency. Moreover, over 60% of the respondents registered increased savings since the adoption of Sarafu--credit as the community currency. Moreover, the members have increased their savings based on community currency for speculative purposes, leading to low circulation of money within the community. In any given nation, majorities are either average earners or relatively below the poverty line and these citizens either resides in the rural areas or in informal settlements in urban centers. In a century epitomized by rapid urbanization, the population living in informal settlements continues to grow, and therefore community currency (CC) programmes have been developed to boost employment in informal settlements with community currencies. These CC are geared towards solving some of the pertinent issues within the society, such as lack of basic services, high (youth) unemployment and economic instability. The introduction of Sarafu-credit in Kwale area has immensely transformed the lives of the local community, thus provision of basic needs and other social needs are met with little struggles among the community members.

### 3.3 Nature and organization of Sarafu--credit system

The community are organized into smaller units known as “Chama” each chama are responsible for carrying a particular service or activity to the community, for instance, some units offer manual labor, water vending, “bodaboda”, flour milling units, shopkeepers, retailers, vegetable sellers, farmers among other entities which permeates throughout the society. In each entity, we observed that over 60% of the exchanges of goods and service relied on Sarafu--credit, while only 40% of the transactions were being done through the legal currency. In a study conducted by [31], found that a similar community currency accounted for over 60% of business transaction, thus our findings were in congruent to previous findings. Moreover, the use of CC has been found to stabilize the legal currency, and cautions the price fluctuations [32]. Furthermore, studies have shown that there is up scaling of several forms of alternative currencies, in which the alternative databases have over three hundred local alternative paper currencies, including the cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin represent non-government backed digital currencies that have grown substantially through the underlying Blockchain technology, timebanking is another form of alternative currency where more than four million hours of time have been exchanged for future time from network members around the globe while within the local set up, Bangla pesa has been used for a longer period of time at the coastal region of Kenya [33].

### 3.4 Social fabrics/ cohesion or network due to Sarafu--credit

Through the community currency, social integration and togetherness has been greatly enhanced. Moreover, the economic logic of the “chamas” which is anchored on the principle of mutualization and circulation, with the main aim of pulling money into the group and pushing it out to its members [34]. From this study, improved security, enhanced cohesion, improved trust and saving potential among members were part of the impacts attributed to the community currency. Moreover, 75% of the focused group discussion (FGD) summary results revealed that security has improved since the introduction of community currency within the community, being business transaction is purely based on mutual trust. A significant percentage of the respondents, 65% revealed that community cohesion and trust has been achieved due to community currency. The platform in which the community currency is modeled has provided safeguards; moreover, the community currency is purely digital money. The findings further showed that of the use of “Sarafu-credit” currency has enhanced social relations among members of the communities. The participants reported that the use of “Sarafu-credit” enhanced friendships among community members because of frequent interactions during exchange of goods and services among them. The findings also indicated that the use of “Sarafu-credit” as community currency led to increased investments among members of the community. This was reported by some participants who indicated that the use of “Sarafu-credit” community currency made more small scale businesses to increase within the areas where trade was happening. This finding agrees with the Social Capital Theory which reported that, social capital promotes linkages involving government, voluntary organizations, the private sector and NGO’s with trust playing a key role for bonding, bridging and linking social capital [35]. Similarly, Kwon, et al ([36]) reported that community currency users showed higher levels of quality of life. Evidence from this study suggests community currency holds strong potential to serve as an important mechanism to provide unmet, or additional, social services. It may also contribute to delivering multiple social objectives, such as improving social cohesion and empowering active citizenship. Moreover, Gomez and Helmsing ([37]) indicated that community currency is often called as a vehicle that alleviates the problems caused by unemployment or insecure employment by providing learning opportunities and improving members’ skills to upgrade their employability in the traditional job market. The findings also agree with Meyer and Hudon, ([38]) which suggest that community currencies have strong collective attributes such as community building, as well as the insertion of solidarity and cooperative values in money. These currencies enable the creation of new communities based on shared values for community development and social cohesion building.

## V. Conclusions

The study explored the impact of “Sarafu-credit” as community currency in Kwale County of Kenya. The adoption of community currency within the community members of Kwale County transformed the lives of the people. Improved the ease of doing business and positively impacted on the general livelihood of the entire community. It is clear from the study that valuable opportunities exist for the use of community currencies. Similarly, the implications for the local communities and national audience in terms of the use of the community currencies should not be underrated.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following are available online at [www.mdpi.com/xxx/s1](http://www.mdpi.com/xxx/s1), Figure S1: title, Table S1: title, Video S1: title.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, NNM, methodology, NNM.; software, NNM.; validation, NNM, MO. and VM.; formal analysis, NNM.; investigation, NNM.; resources, MO and VM.; data curation, NNM.; writing—original draft preparation, NNM.; writing—review and editing, NNM.; visualization, NNM.; supervision, MO and VM.; project administration, MO and VM.; funding acquisition, MO. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable” for studies not involving humans or animals.

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