

# Savings Groups and Social Safety Nets in Rural Zimbabwe: Case of Umzingwane District

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to evaluate savings groups and social safety nets in rural Zimbabwe with reference to Umzingwane district. This was done through evaluation of the contribution of groups' financial resources and social support to social safety nets, challenges faced by savings groups in providing social safety nets and strategies in place to mitigate the challenges faced by savings groups in providing social safety nets. The study adopted a sequential explanatory research design. Data was gathered using questionnaires which were administered to savings group members and interviews administered to committee members of savings groups in wards 3, 4 and 5 of Umzingwane district. The study revealed that the contribution of financial resources to social safety nets are that savings groups assist members in establishing businesses, mitigate effects of drought, in meeting education, medical, food and hygiene requirements as well as access to clean water. The study found that the contribution of social support from savings groups to social safety nets are that savings groups provide networks where ideas on handling shocks are shared and knowledge on how to mitigate risk is acquired. The study highlighted that the challenges faced by savings groups in providing social safety nets in rural Zimbabwe are inadequate loan amount, savings and social funds, politics in the groups, short loan repayment periods and lack of clear policies in handling of the social fund. The study revealed that the strategies in place to mitigate the challenges faced by savings groups in contributing to social safety nets are revision of policies in handling social funds and linkage of savings groups to mainstream banking. The study recommends that there should be clear policies in handling of social funds among the groups and that savings groups should be educated on governance insures so as to foster accountability, transparency and proper financial management to promote social safety nets.

**Keywords:** savings groups, social safety nets, shocks, vulnerability, crises, social fund, group dynamics, social support, social capital, social networks

## INTRODUCTION

According to Frisancho and Valdivia (2020), people in rural areas around the world have limited access to formal financial system. The implication is that people are deprived of savings, credit and insurance, which might be important for their livelihood and in overcoming vulnerabilities. This is in agreement with World Bank (2018) report which stated that about 1.7 billion people around the world. have no access to formal financial systems. Global Findex (2021) reports that in Sub Saharan Africa (excluding high income), 55% of the adult population own bank accounts against the world average of 76% of adult account ownership. Global Findex (2021) further reveal that in SSA (excluding high income), 16% of the adult population save in the formal financial system against the world average of 29%. The implication is the majority of the people in SSA (excluding high income) do not own bank accounts, and most of those who have bank accounts do not use them for savings. This is in agreement with Karlan et al. (2014) who argue that even when formal financial institutions are present, the uptake and usage of formal financial services is limited. According to Burlando et al. (2020), Bauchet et al.(2021), Cassidy and Fafcamp (2018), Makina (2019), Mersland et al. (2019) , Walle and Makina (2019) and

World Bank (2018), some of the reasons why people are not using formal financial system is because of high fees or costs, distance to the nearest branch, inadequate financial system infrastructure, documentation requirements by formal financial institutions, information asymmetry, lack of flexibility of the formal financial institutions and limited understanding and biases against formal financial institutions.

Burlando et al. (2020), Mersland et al. (2019) and Nakato (2021) report that as a result of limited access to formal finance, the poor end up using informal financial services such as savings groups, in order to satisfy their financial needs. Mersland et al. (2019) using global savings groups data from Savings Group Information Exchange (SAVIX) database reveal that from 2010 to 2017, Africa experienced about 285% growth in the number of savings groups. This might suffice to the view that the majority of the people in Africa have limited access to formal finance and hence they end up establishing or joining savings groups in order to satisfy their needs for finance so as to spur their investment, livelihood and mitigate shocks. Mersland et al. (2019) reveal the distribution of savings groups in Africa is in such a way that 65% of the savings groups are located in rural areas. This implies that in Africa, the majority of the savings groups are found in rural areas. This is consistent with the views by Frisancho and Valdivia (2018) that most of the rural people around the world do not have access to formal financial system and they are deprived of formal savings, credit and insurance.

Nakato (2021), Burlando et al. (2020) and Cassidy and Fafcamp (2018) are in agreement that a savings group is a group of between 15 and 25 self selected members who come together to save money and borrow from the pool if the savings. This implies that savings groups are member owned and people are not forced to join savings groups. The issue of trust and bonds that exist within the members of the communities is very important in savings groups, starting from their very formation. The analysis from the views of the authors reveal that savings groups provide access to savings and credit (financial services) and a platform for solidarity and mutual support (social capital), which may act as safety nets against unexpected shocks faced by members. Nakato (2021), Burlando et al. (2020), Frisancho and Valdivia (2020), Frolich and Nguyen (2020) and Cassidy and Fafcamp (2018) reveal that savings groups have an insurance mechanism which is known as a social fund. The authors opine that the social fund is used to assist the members who are facing emergencies.

Various studies such as Frolich and Nguyen (2020), Frisancho and Valdivia (2020), Chineka and Mundau (2019), Chineka and Mtetwa (2021), Gonzalez – Martinez et al. (2024), Lakhani (2014), Lukhwa et al. (2022), Mokwane (2018), Mtetwa (2018) and Nguluwe (2016) have been done on in formal financial organisation such as savings groups on social protection and vulnerabilities, however the evidence is scanty, inconclusive and contradictory. Mtetwa (2018), Chineka and Mundau (2019), Chineka and Mtetwa (2021) conducted studies on savings groups and social protection in Zimbabwe, however, the studies were made with reference to the suburbs of Harare and did not focus on the rural areas of Zimbabwe. This study sought to exploit this knowledge gap by focusing on savings groups and social safety nets in rural Zimbabwe with reference to Umzingwane district. This was done by focusing on the contribution of savings groups financial access (savings, loans and social fund) and social support (social capital) to social safety net in rural Zimbabwe, the challenges faced by savings groups in providing social safety nets and the strategies that have been put in place to mitigate the challenges faced by savings groups in providing social safety nets in rural Zimbabwe. The study was not specific to a particular savings group structure and therefore used all the savings groups' structures namely Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs) and Village Lending and Credit Associations (VSLAs). The rest of the paper is structured as follows; section 2 is review of literature, section 3 is the research methods, section 4 is presentation of results and discussion and section 5 is a presentation of conclusions and recommendations.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According Lakhawi (2014) and Gichuki, Mutuku and Kinuthia (2015) Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs) or Accumulating Savings and Credit Associations (ASCAs) provide the means of livelihood and subsistence to the poor women. Alia et al. (2025) posit that savings groups' membership is associated with food security. The authors further report that Ordinary Least Squares regression reveals that having a female household member in a savings groups improved household food security as it contributed to 5- 15% reduction in lacking food and skipping meals. Para- Mallam (2017), Dizon et al. (2020) and Do (2023) also postulate that savings groups provide national social safety nets in areas where there is absence of well functioning insurance

market. The implication is that, where people fail to access mainstream insurance, savings groups provide insurance or safety nets to those at the bottom of the pyramid. Dizon et al. (2020), savings groups provide risk diversification (especially to women in countries with gender inequality) opportunity to individuals and household. Wahhal (2010) argue that savings groups provide a method of risk management among the group members. Allen and Panetta (2010) and Dizon et al. (2020) opine that group savings paves the way for the members to share risk across the household in the community. This is because savings groups allow members to contribute savings and access loans from the savings which can assist the members to mitigate risk. Alia et al. (2025) argue savings group can mitigate against idiosyncratic risk such as an injury to the family member but can also mitigate against covariant risk if the timing and extent of the exposures is varied among the members.

Savings groups provide great economic security as a result of participation in savings groups. Christian (2019), Walcott et al. (2023) Somville and Vandewalle (2022) note that credit from the savings groups help the members to smoothen their income. Kaasiime et al. (2021) opine that savings groups reduce the need to borrow in times of crisis. However, according to Le Polain et al. (2018) and Landman and Mthombeni (2021), savings groups contribute to indebtedness of members and putting them in poverty cycles. Savings groups promote resilience of women to economic and climate related shocks. This is because savings groups provide the platforms to save and lend money, hence providing the capacity for risk management and economic independence. Savings groups also help to diversify income sources. Financial safety nets to finance emergencies such as medical and food related, improve sustainable investments in family and community well being. UNICEF (2025) asserts that the contribution of savings groups to community resilience in Mauritania.

According to Chineka and Mundau (2019), community savings groups help to improve members' capacity to acquire assets which can be liquidated when the need arises. The absence of structured and constitutional framework hinder savings groups from providing viable social safety nets for the vulnerable rural households. Chineka and Mandau (2019) opine that community savings provide financial benefits that improve income security which result in better livelihood outcomes. Aga Khan Development Network (2010) reveals that access to financial services have resulted in small holder farmers building greater resilience. Child Protection in Crisis (2011), argues that CSGs have been used in different communities to reinforce the resilience of children (in child headed families). Milazzo and Vande Walle (2015) reveal that savings groups have enabled the female headed families or household in Africa to reduce poverty. Through improving financial resilience, savings groups avail an opportunity to restrict deleterious dynamics caused by economic decline.

Gonzales- Martinez, D' Espaillier and Mersland (2024), in their study on informal insurance and loans in savings groups using a large sample of savings groups across the world and applying estimation approaches namely panel regression and augmented inverse propensity weighting reveal that low income household are provided social safety nets by savings groups through loans, savings and social welfare. The authors note that the social fund is a form of informal insurance which assist group members in risk sharing by covering life cycle events related losses. Social fund protect members from idiosyncratic shocks which are disruptive. Borrowing and social capital promotes wealth creation of group members, who overcome poverty through income generating activities and informal insurance. This implies that savings groups, through giving access to members to basic financial services such as loans, promote the income generation capacity of the members. The income capacity generation of members promotes the resilience of members to shocks and vulnerabilities. This implies that the income generation capacity that is promoted by savings groups economically empowers the members so that they are resilient to economic shocks.

A study which was conducted by Chineka and Mundau (2019) on savings groups, community resilience and social protection in Hatcliff in Harare reveal that Community Savings Groups (CSGs) improve the resilience of the community to crisis through provision of credit facilities that group members resort to in the times of crisis. The authors note that savings groups improve the capacity of the members to purchase assets, which can be liquidated in times of need. The authors report that the absence of institutional and structural frameworks disturbs the potential of CSGs as effective social safety nets. Mtetwa (2018) and Nguluwe (2016) opine that community initiatives for social protection such as savings groups have widest coverage as a result of accessibility. Mtetwa (2018), Kaseke (2018) and Brannen (2010) opine that community savings groups are important facet of informal social protection mechanisms. CSGs provide financial benefits which improve income security leading to better

livelihood outcomes (Chineka and Mundau, 2019). Brannem (2010) cited in Chineka and Mundau (2019) assert that CSGs have been used in Tanzania to meet, reinforce productive capacities and consumption needs of the poor. CSGs have enabled the small holder farmers to gain resilience through access to basic financial services. Child Protection in Crises (2011) cited in Chineka and Mundau (2019) contend that CSGs have strengthened the resilience of children especially those from the child headed families.

Frolich and Nguyen (2020) conducted a study on the impact of linking savings groups to formal financial services providers and strengthening their internal group insurance mechanism and report that savings groups have self- insurance ( social fund) which is used when there are unexpected shocks. The authors opine that the social fund was not efficient in as a result of little monetary contribution to the social funds, support to group members in need was provided as a loan with interest not a grant. There was a mixture of self interest and savings motives, for example some members used the social fund for schools fees (Frolich and Nguyen, 2020). The authors further note that there was a requirement of time for the groups to determine the type of the shock to be insured.

African Union – United Nations Development Program (2025) opine that some of the Community Based Social Protection Organisations (CBSPO) such as Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (ROSCAs) and Self Help Groups (SHGs) provide access to finance (emergency loans). The authors note that ROSCAs and SHG also provide emotional support, employment network and labour sharing arrangements. The authors further affirm that financial requirements to join and make regular contributions become an obstacle and hence hindering their potential for safety nets. Economic instability (inflation and limited resources) is a barrier. According to AU- UNDP (2025), CBSPO such as savings groups are weaker in addressing covariate shocks such as climate related risk and economic crisis but are effective in addressing idiosyncratic shocks (job loss, illness and household emergencies). CBSPOs are member owned and hence they depend on social capital and are able to address localized needs but have no universal coverage. CBSPOs can be viewed as a first step towards social protection agenda in Africa as they are helpful in building mutual trust. AU- UNDP (2025) opine that some CBSPOs are established to manage and mitigate risk whilst others focus on reducing poverty and vulnerability through creation of community savings mechanisms which are designed to provide financial support during times of need.

Mokomane (2018) opine that members in CBSPOs share information, job opportunities and provide emotional support. AU- UNDP (2025) opines that social capital is another coping strategy which allows members to provide support to members of the community for example borrowing food and cash. Bonding social capital is based on Ubuntu or high levels of trust among the community members. AU- UNDP (2025) report that in Liberia and Sierra- Leone, CBSPOs have provided support to many households. The authors note that CBSPOs share information, employment opportunities and emotional support.

According to Chineka and Mtetwa (2021), savings groups provide social capital that enable the members to navigate psycho – social stressors they encounter. Savings groups provide access to basic financial services which enable the marginalised households to meet their basic needs and grow their businesses. Overseas Development Institute (2017) cited in Chineka and Mtetwa (2021) view Savings and Credit Associations (SCAs) as non formal social security. This is because poor people who do not have access to mainstream banking rely on them. The authors opine that SCAs are grassroots organisations and community based organisations to alleviate poverty and they provide household economic strengthening method.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The study adopted a sequential explanatory research design with the aim of using mixed research approach. The study used a sample of 15 committee members of savings and 120 savings members drawn from wards 3, 4 and 5 in Umzingwane district. The study adopted a purposive sampling design with the aim of gain in-depth insights on savings groups and social safety nets in rural Zimbabwe with reference to Umzingwane district. Data was collected using questionnaires and interviews. A total of 15 interviews were administered to the committee members of savings groups and 120 questionnaires were distributed to group members drawn from wards 3, 4 and 5 in Umzingwane district. Wards 3, 4 and 5 were chosen due to the fact that there are many savings groups

with operations in the ward, accessibility to transport networks and that the wards are neighbouring wards (making them easily accessible). The study was not specific to a particular savings group structure and therefore used all the savings groups structures namely ROSCAs and VLSAs. Pilot test was done to ensure the validity of the research instruments and to correct errors and to remove questions that did not align to the study.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The following analysis and discussion is on savings groups and social safety nets in rural Zimbabwe with reference to Umzingwane district. Table 1 below shows educational levels of savings group members.

Table 1: Educational Level of savings group members

Level of Education	Frequency	Percentage
Never attended school	3	4%
Primary Education	26	32%
Secondary Education	47	57%
Tertiary Education	6	7%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Primary Data

Table 1 above shows that most of the savings group members that participated in the study have primary (32%) and secondary (57%). This indicates that the savings group members are literate. The implication is that when they are provided with access to financial resources and training and education, the savings groups composed of them, can be a catalyst for social security in Umzingwane district. This is because prudence finance states that literacy and education improve people’s financial behaviours, which may promote the ability of the group to provide social safety nets in rural communities.

All the interviewees (100%) who were the committee members of savings groups stated that Non Governmental Organisations are the only external organisations providing support to the savings groups. The interviewees highlighted that NGOs provide savings groups with training and education which is very crucial in enabling the savings groups to come up with ways of providing social safety nets and promotions of good financial behaviours which enable the groups to be able to provide social security in their communities. Table 2 below shows the contribution of savings groups’ financial services to social safety nets.

Table 2: Contribution of savings groups’ financial services to social safety nets

Contribution of savings groups’ financial services to social safety nets	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
ISALS groups assisted me in meeting medical expenses	77%	17%	0%	3%	3%
ISALS assisted me in meeting food and hygiene requirements	78%	12%	6%	1%	3%
ISALS assisted me in paying schools fees for my children.	59%	21%	11%	5%	4%
ISALS assisted me in starting a business	92%	5%	1%	2%	0%

ISALS assisted to acquire financial education	53%	22%	13%	6%	6%
ISALS assisted me to have access to shelter	20%	32%	15%	23%	20%
ISALS enabled me to mitigate the effects of drought	87%	11%	1%	1%	0%
ISALS provided me with access to clean water	82%	5%	0%	6%	7%

Source: Primary Data

The results from table 2 above, indicates that the main contribution of savings groups’ financial services to social safety nets are that savings groups; assist members to start businesses, mitigate effects of drought, have access to clean water, meeting food and hygiene requirements, meet medical expenses and access to education through provision of the ability to pay school fees and access to financial education. This implies that savings groups assist members in vulnerabilities and shock and give them capacity for wealth creation through establishment of business. Wealth creation has a multiplier effect in that when members establish income generating activities, their ability to be resilient to shocks may improve. The results of the study indicate that the savings groups do not contribute much to access to shelter for the members.

This is in line with Gonzales- Martinez, D’ Espaillier and Mersland (2024), in their study on informal insurance and loans in savings groups using a large sample of savings groups across the world and applying estimation approaches namely panel regression and augmented inverse propensity weighting where they reveal that low-income household are provided social safety nets by savings groups through loans, savings and social welfare. Gonzales- Martinez, D’ Espaillier and Mersland (2024) further highlight that borrowing and social capital promotes wealth creation of group members , who overcome poverty through income generating activities and informal insurance. This is consistent with A study which was conducted by Chineka and Mundau (2019) on savings groups, community resilience and social protection in Hatcliff in Harare reveal that Community Savings Groups (CSGs) improve the resilience of the community to crisis through provision of credit facilities that group members resort to in the times of crisis. The authors note that savings groups improve the capacity of the members to purchase assets, which can be liquidated in times of need. The authors report that the absence of institutional and structural frameworks disturbs the potential of CSGs as effective social safety nets. Table 3 below shows contribution of groups’ social support to social networks in Umzingwane district in Zimbabwe.

Table 3: Contribution of groups’ social support to social safety nets

Contribution of groups’ social support on social safety nets	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Savings groups provided me with knowledge of my rights	23%	15%	10%	26%	26%
Savings groups provided me with knowledge on how I can mitigate risk	84%	8%	2%	5%	1%
Savings groups provided me with the network where we share ideas on how to handle various problems	90%	5%	0%	3%	2%
Savings groups provided the women with the platforms to make decisions and assist them in making household decisions.	93%	5%	2%	0%	0%
Savings groups enabled me to contribute to community decision making	32%	17%	5%	30%	26%
Savings groups assisted me in earning respect in my family	34%	17%	4%	21%	24%

Source: Primary Data

The results from the table 3 above, shows that the contribution of groups’ social support to social safety nets are that savings groups; provide networks where ideas on handling shocks are shared, provide knowledge on how one can mitigate risk and provide the marginalised people such as women with the capacity of household decision making. This implies that bonding social capital in savings groups is very important to the group members as it enable members to network, share ideas and information and get support from other members during the crisis. On the other hand, AU- UNDP (2025) argues CBSPOs are member owned and hence they depend on social capital and are able to address localized needs but have no universal coverage. CBSPOs can be viewed as a first step towards social protection agenda in Africa as they are helpful in building mutual trust. Table 4 below indicates challenges faced by savings groups in providing social security.

Table 4: Challenges faced by savings groups in providing social security

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Inadequate social funds in savings groups	92%	8%	0%	0%	0%
Politics in the savings group	85%	3%	3%	4%	5%
Inadequate savings contributions	87%	4%	1%	4%	4%
Low loan sizes	93%	5%	2%	0%	0%
Short loan repayment periods	91%	5%	2%	0%	2%
Unfair loan disbursement	43%	15%	2%	5%	35%
Lack of clear policies in handling social funds	98%	1%	0%	1%	0%
Savings groups have many members	52%	2%	10%	30%	6%

Source: Primary Data

The results from the table 4 above, indicates that the main challenges faced by savings groups in providing social security are inadequate social funds, politics in the group, inadequate savings, low loans sizes, short loan repayment periods and lack of clear policies in handling social funds. The size of the group based on the number of savings group members is not a major challenge faced by savings groups in providing social security.

Twelve out of fifteen (80%) interviewees who were savings groups committee members highlighted that the strategies that are in place to mitigate the challenge faced by savings groups in providing social security are revision of policies so that they provide clarity on how social fund is handled, linkage of savings group to mainstream banking and training and education of members. One of the interviewees said the following words.

*Our group is in the process of revising its policies on the disbursement and handling of the social fund. We realised that some of the members are abusing the social fund. Some of the members have been faking death and illness of their relatives, with the hope of being assisted by the social fund. Our group is in the process of clarifying the nature of the relatives of our members who can be funded through the social fund and the nature of the problems that can be funded through social funds. The problem with handling of social funds has caused disputes among group members. Another issue was that our group should open a bank account so that we can keep our funds, open financial history with banks and get the chance to access loans. However, there are some members who are raising fears that opening a bank account requires a lot of documentations and that will also result in banks to interfering in the groups’ activities and hence souring the relations of members in the group. The implication is that there is a need to revise the policies on the management of the social fund, so that there is clarity on the nature of shocks covered by the social fund and the relatives for group members who can benefit from the group’s social fund.*

All the committee members of savings groups (100%) who were interviewed highlighted that savings groups have been used by external organisations such as Churches, NGOs and government departments to bring social security initiatives such as food distribution, cash payout distribution, climate related trainings and agricultural inputs distribution. This implies that the external organisations are now riding on the savings groups to provide social support and social security to the rural communities. This may be due to the fact that savings groups are able to provide collective action, bring together people and have wide coverage in rural communities. This makes it easier for groups to be used by external organisations in providing social security in rural communities. This supports Mtetwa (2018) and Nguluwe (2016) who opine that community initiatives for social protection such as savings groups have widest coverage as a result of accessibility.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that the contribution of savings groups' financial services to social safety nets in Umzingwane district are that groups assist members in starting business (wealth creation or income generation), mitigate effects of drought, provide access to clean water, enable members to meet medical, food and hygiene requirements as well as access to education. The study also concludes that the contribution of savings groups' social support to social safety nets are that the groups provide knowledge on how one can mitigate risks, provide networks where ideas on handling of shocks are shared and improve household decision making capacities of members who are marginalised in the society such as women. The study further concludes that the challenges faced by savings groups in providing social security are inadequate savings, loans and social funds, politics in the groups, short loan repayment periods and lack of clear policies in handling social funds. The study concludes that the strategies in place to mitigate the challenges faced by savings groups in providing safety nets are revision of policies on handling of social funds and linking savings groups to formal banking so that they get access to diverse financial products which might improve credit adequacy and their ability to provide social safety nets in the rural communities. Savings groups have been used by the external organisations such as NGOs, churches and government departments as a catalyst for providing social security in Umzingwane district in Zimbabwe. Based on the results and conclusions of the study, the study makes the following recommendations:

- 1) Savings groups should be educated on governance issues. This will enable proper leadership, accountability, transparency and fairness in the groups, leading to proper financial services provisions and good group dynamics which may improve the ability of savings groups in providing social safety nets in rural areas of Zimbabwe.
- 2) Linkage of savings groups to formal banking should be taken with care by taking note of the attributes of group members, socio – economic statuses of group members and provision of the products tailor made to the needs of savings groups. This will enable the groups to have the capacity to provide social capital and at the same time without destroying groups dynamics.
- 3) There should be clear policies on how to handle vulnerabilities and shocks by savings groups. This is with reference to the clarity in the use and management of social fund (group insurance product) in addressing shocks. There should be clarity on the nature of the shock covered by social funds and also the nature of members' beneficiaries covered by the social funds.
- 4) Savings groups should be trained on financial management. This will enable the savings groups to have proper financial behaviours and management of the loan book which will enable the savings groups to provide social security in rural communities in Zimbabwe.
- 5) Savings groups should be trained on the social fund. This will boost their contribution to the social fund. This will also enable the group members to mix the use of social funds with their needs.
- 6) The savings groups should clearly clarify whether the social fund is a grant or is taken as a loan with interest. This will reduce confusion on the savings groups members.

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