

# Governance for Resilient Rural Livelihoods in the Face of Pandemics and Disasters – Insights from Rural South Africa



Betty Claire Mubangizi <sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

## ABSTRACT

Rural livelihoods play a crucial role in South Africa’s socio-economic development but face significant challenges, such as poor infrastructure, environmental risks and economic marginalisation. Policies like the Comprehensive Rural Development Programme aim to address these issues, but gaps in policy formulation, weak implementation, and inadequate participation by the affected community often limit their impact. Effective governance that aligns national priorities with local needs is essential for achieving sustainable rural livelihoods. This study examined the relationship between policy implementation, governance, and rural engagement in the face of pandemics and disasters. Data were collected during eleven interviews and two focus group discussions in the Alfred Nzo District Municipality in South Africa. The findings highlight the importance of micro-level, place-based development, integrating community-driven initiatives with broader policy frameworks. The study established that robust localised planning, inclusive governance, and participatory decision-making build the resilience of rural communities and ensure that the development strategies implemented in these communities align with their reality. The study also emphasises the need for institutional mechanisms that strengthen the capacity and agency of local government actors to lead development initiatives. Given the growing challenges posed by climate change, disasters and pandemics, this paper made actionable recommendations to improve governance, expand the participation of rural communities in policymaking, and integrate disaster management strategies into local economic development. The use of the sustainable livelihoods framework in this research makes its findings relevant to the current discourse on how to shape policy and strategy to achieve equitable, community-centred, and adaptive rural governance in South Africa.

### Correspondence

Betty Claire Mubangizi  
Email: [Mubangizib@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:Mubangizib@ukzn.ac.za)

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## INTRODUCTION

Rural livelihoods are fundamental to a nation’s socio-economic character. Rural livelihoods contribute to the economy’s strength, particularly in regions where agriculture, small enterprises, and informal economies dominate.<sup>1</sup> In South Africa, a significant portion of the rural populace relies on state grants,

<sup>1</sup> Sam Moyo, “Family Farming in Sub-Saharan Africa: Its Contribution to Agriculture, Food Security and Rural Development,” (Working paper, 2016).

small-scale trade and agriculture, contributing substantially to the nation's economic growth.<sup>2</sup> Despite the vital contribution that rural communities make to the domestic economy, studies have documented that these communities face persistent challenges, including deteriorating infrastructure, vulnerability to environmental shocks – such as floods and droughts – and limited investment.<sup>3</sup>

According to Stats SA South Africa's rural communities experience pervasive poverty, which affects the most vulnerable and economically disadvantaged populations the most severely.<sup>4</sup> These communities face numerous challenges, including geographic isolation, depletion of natural resources, food insecurity, societal disintegration, and unresolved land tenure disputes. Duale and Adebayo argue that these challenges need to be engaged through a multifaceted approach to enhance the economic opportunities available to rural communities and ensure their sustainability and resilience in the face of emerging local and global risks.<sup>5</sup> In light of these challenges, policies aimed at supporting rural communities, such as Local Economic Development (LED) initiatives and disaster management strategies, are crucial to improving resilience and sustainable development.<sup>6</sup> Salvia and Quaranta argue that community resilience is a dynamic social process that portrays how communities respond to external challenges, including economic crises, natural catastrophes, or other threats to their sustainability.<sup>7</sup> However, the efficacy of the development policies that are formulated often hinges on the extent to which local communities are included in their design and planning, the extent to which they address the demands of these communities, and the extent to which members of the community can access these policies.<sup>8</sup>

South Africa's national and provincial governments have formulated and implemented several rural development policies, such as the 2009 Comprehensive Rural Development Programme (CRDP) and the 2018 draft National Spatial Development Framework (NSDF). However, according to the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform, these centralised strategies have not effectively advanced sustainable livelihoods.<sup>9</sup> While South Africa's attempts to reform the inequitable distribution of land that occurred during the colonial and apartheid chapters of its history are an essential step, these initiatives have also been confronted with social tensions and disruptions to livelihoods.

Governance processes and policy implementation play a vital role in shaping the outcomes of rural development initiatives. For governance to be effective, transparent decision-making processes, inclusive policies, and monitoring mechanisms are necessary. In South Africa, governance structures are required to balance national development priorities with localised needs to empower rural communities. However, the effectiveness of local development initiatives has often been impeded by gaps in policy, weak enforcement mechanisms and limited community participation. Strengthening governance processes is essential to enhance the impact of rural development programs and ensure that resources and opportunities reach the most vulnerable populations. Moreover, Siddle and Koelble highlight that contemporary challenges, such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, continue to exacerbate existing vulnerabilities in rural areas, as they pose significant threats to rural livelihoods through

<sup>2</sup> V. N. Mathinya et al., "Can Small-Scale Farming Systems Serve as an Economic Engine in the Former Homelands of South Africa?," *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems* 7 (2023): 1222120.

<sup>3</sup> Innocent Chirisa and Verna Nel, "Resilience and Climate Change in Rural Areas: A Review of Infrastructure Policies across Global Regions," *Sustainable and Resilient Infrastructure* 7, no. 5 (2022): 380–90; Héctor Javier García Higuera, Todor Rogelja, and Laura Secco, "Policy Framework as a Challenge and Opportunity for Social Innovation Initiatives in Eco-Tourism in Colombia," *Forest Policy and Economics* 157 (2023): 103076.

<sup>4</sup> Stats SA, "Youth Unemployment Still High in Q1: 2018," Data Stories - Department of Statistics South Africa, July 15, 2018, <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=11129>.

<sup>5</sup> Maslah Mahamed Duale, "Challenges and Opportunities of Livelihood Diversification in Ethiopia: A Review Article," *Int. J. Agric. Econ* 9 (2024): 134–47; Sulaimon Adewale, Sherifat Shola Adebayo, and Peters Abiodun Afolabi, "Managing School Safety in Nigeria in the 21st Century: The Need for A Balanced Approach," *African Journal of Humanities and Contemporary Education Research* 10, no. 1 (2023): 72–78; Jianbin Xiong et al., "A Review of Plant Phenotypic Image Recognition Technology Based on Deep Learning," *Electronics* 10, no. 1 (January 4, 2021): 81, <https://doi.org/10.3390/electronics10010081>.

<sup>6</sup> Imran Tajuddin and Hastuti Mulang, "Local Economic Resilience: A Qualitative Study of Development Innovation in Rural Areas," *Golden Ratio of Social Science and Education* 4, no. 2 (2024): 180–89.

<sup>7</sup> Rosanna Salvia and Giovanni Quaranta, "Place-Based Rural Development and Resilience: A Lesson from a Small Community," *Sustainability* 9, no. 6 (2017): 889.

<sup>8</sup> J. Birkmann et al., "Poverty, Livelihoods and Sustainable Development," in *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, ed. In: H.-O. Pörtner et al. (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2022), 1171–1274.

<sup>9</sup> Menini Gibbens and Carel Schoeman, "Planning for Sustainable Livelihood Development in the Context of Rural South Africa: A Micro-Level Approach," *Town and Regional Planning* 76 (2020): 14–28.

increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, which impact water availability, food security and agricultural production.<sup>10</sup>

Disaster Management and LED policies are fundamental to support rural livelihoods in South Africa. The recent global crises and natural disasters, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, accentuate the relevance of comprehensive disaster preparedness and recovery frameworks. Correspondingly, LED policies facilitate job creation, economic diversification, and entrepreneurship in rural areas. When effectively implemented, these policies can mitigate the effects of economic and environmental shocks and provide a basis for sustainable development.<sup>11</sup> Notwithstanding the importance of LED policies and governance processes, the integration and execution of disaster management and LED policies are often challenged by institutional inefficiencies and resource constraints, among other issues.<sup>12</sup> Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape rural livelihoods. Governance processes and effective policy implementation are vital in determining the success or failure of development interventions.<sup>13</sup> Strong governance ensures that the needs and priorities of rural communities are adequately considered in policy formulation and decision-making. Additionally, effective implementation mechanisms are critical to translate policies into tangible outcomes that improve the lives of the rural populace.

Given these realities, examining the relationship between policy implementation and governance processes and their impact on rural livelihoods in South Africa is essential. This study examines South Africa's policies to support rural livelihoods, exploring their formulation, implementation, and evaluation to determine their impact on rural communities. This exploration aims to identify areas where community participation, public engagement and policy dissemination need to be strengthened and to contribute to the existing knowledge about the relationships between policy, governance, and rural livelihoods in South Africa.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Framework of Sustainable Rural Livelihoods

Sustainable development encompasses multiple dimensions, including ecological, socio-cultural, and economic factors, and operates across different scales, ranging from global to local. Sustainable livelihoods refer to the capabilities, assets, and activities required to maintain a means of living that is resilient to shocks and stresses while enhancing well-being and environmental sustainability. Building on these elements, the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) conceptualises individuals and communities as functioning within a dynamic context vulnerable to economic disruptions, environmental shocks, and shifting socio-political dynamics.<sup>14</sup> The framework emphasises the role of livelihood assets, or capital, that influence and are influenced by the structures, processes, and institutions that determine access to resources.<sup>15</sup> A sustainable livelihood can cope with and recover from external pressures without compromising the natural resource base or the livelihoods of future generations.<sup>16</sup> This concept is widely used in development studies to analyse poverty reduction strategies and inform policy interventions.<sup>17</sup>

In the context of rural South Africa, the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework provides a valuable lens for analysing rural governance, policy implementation, and community engagement. Mubangizi found that rural households and communities in the Alfred Nzo District Municipality relied on diverse livelihood strategies to navigate environmental uncertainties, economic constraints, and governance

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Siddle and Thomas Koelble, "Local Government in South Africa: Can the Objectives of the Developmental State Be Achieved through the Current Model of Decentralised Governance?" (eSocialSciences, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Gibbens and Schoeman, "Planning for Sustainable Livelihood Development in the Context of Rural South Africa: A Micro-Level Approach."

<sup>12</sup> Eugene Makaya et al., "Water Governance Challenges in Rural South Africa: Exploring Institutional Coordination in Drought Management," *Water Policy* 22, no. 4 (2020): 519–40.

<sup>13</sup> Diana Dushkova and Olga Ivlieva, "Empowering Communities to Act for a Change: A Review of the Community Empowerment Programs towards Sustainability and Resilience," *Sustainability* 16, no. 19 (2024): 8700; Xiaoxiao Lin, Shuai Wang, and Yue Gao, "Global Trends and Research Hotspots of EAT-Lancet Diet: A Bibliometric Analysis," *Frontiers in Nutrition* 10 (2024): 1328351.

<sup>14</sup> Nithya Natarajan et al., "A Sustainable Livelihoods Framework for the 21st Century," *World Development* 155 (2022): 105898.

<sup>15</sup> Fatemeh Nasrnia and Niloofar Ashktorab, "Sustainable Livelihood Framework-Based Assessment of Drought Resilience Patterns of Rural Households of Bakhtegan Basin, Iran," *Ecological Indicators* 128 (2021): 107817.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway, "Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: Practical Concepts for the 21st Century," 1992; Ian Scoones, "Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: A Framework for Analysis," 1998.

<sup>17</sup> F. Ellis, *Rural Livelihoods and Diversity in Developing Countries* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000).

inefficiencies.<sup>18</sup> The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework highlights the need for localised and participatory planning, ensuring that rural development policies align with community realities.<sup>19</sup> Recognising the complexity of rural environments, the framework emphasises people-centred, holistic, and adaptive approaches, ensuring that rural livelihoods are sustained and strengthened against socio-economic and environmental vulnerabilities.

Acknowledging the interdependence of different forms of capital, the framework guides sustainable development policies that integrate community-driven initiatives, governance reforms, and economic resilience strategies.<sup>20</sup> This perspective highlights the importance of bridging the gap between policy frameworks and community agencies to ensure that rural development interventions are inclusive, responsive, and sustainable in the long term.

### **Policies for Rural Livelihoods and Development**

The existing literature highlights the need for policies specifically designed to address the complex challenges faced by vulnerable communities while also providing structured frameworks for crisis response. Jones identified barriers such as limited access to information and language constraints as key factors weakening policy implementation.<sup>21</sup> Although Local Economic Development (LED) policies are crucial in supporting Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and informal economies, their effectiveness is often undermined by insufficient public awareness and limited community engagement, which restricts their reach and impact.

Public participation in policy development ensures that the resulting policies reflect the community's priorities. Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation provides a foundational framework for understanding levels of public participation, ranging from tokenistic consultation to genuine empowerment.<sup>22</sup> According to Gibbens and Cilliers, South Africa supports community-based planning through the Integrated Development Planning (IDP) process at the government level.<sup>23</sup> However, its application as a strategy for sustainable rural development has reportedly been challenged by tokenistic public participation undertaken solely for compliance, poor communication, political interference and unresponsiveness.<sup>24</sup> It is noted that many municipalities view public participation as merely a procedural requirement tied to budget and IDP development processes. Research by Mwangi et al. and Sibanda and Lues emphasise the significance of participatory governance in rural areas where the role of traditional knowledge and local context is critical.<sup>25</sup> Challenges such as limited public awareness and procedural constraints that limit timely and effective engagement limit participation and undermine the inclusivity of policy processes. Nasrnia and Ashktorab stress the need to reform rural management structures, establish formal mechanisms for sustained community engagement in decision-making, and ensure active participation in implementing, monitoring, and evaluating development initiatives.<sup>26</sup> Institutionalising community involvement entails embedding participatory structures within local government frameworks, such as advisory boards, legal mandates for consultation, and decentralised decision-making processes that give local actors a direct role in shaping policies and programs that affect them.

<sup>18</sup> Mubangizi, Betty, C. Rural livelihoods in South Africa: Mapping the role-players. *Administratio Publica*, (2021). 29(4),17-32.

<sup>19</sup> Asrat Mulat Asegie, Samuel Tadesse Adisalem, and Amogne Asfaw Eshetu, "The Effects of COVID-19 on Livelihoods of Rural Households: South Wollo and Oromia Zones, Ethiopia," *Heliyon* 7, no. 12 (2021).

<sup>20</sup> Nasrnia and Ashktorab, "Sustainable Livelihood Framework-Based Assessment of Drought Resilience Patterns of Rural Households of Bakhtegan Basin, Iran."

<sup>21</sup> Kirti V Das et al., "Understanding Subjective Well-Being: Perspectives from Psychology and Public Health," *Public Health Reviews* 41 (2020): 1–32.

<sup>22</sup> Sherry R Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35, no. 4 (1969): 216–24.

<sup>23</sup> Menini Gibbens and Juaneè Cilliers, "ECD Centres as Change Catalysts in Sustainable Rural Livelihood Development: Griekwastad, South Africa, as Case Study," *Environment, Development and Sustainability* 25, no. 8 (2023): 8857–75.

<sup>24</sup> Mavhungu Elias Musitha, "Integrated Development Plan as a Redistribution Policy in South Africa: Prospects and Challenges," *European Journal of Research in Social Sciences Vol* 4, no. 6 (2016); M J Simelane and I Nohumba, "A Guiding Framework for the Effective Operationalisation of IDP as a Tool for Service Delivery in South Africa," *Africa Journal of Public Sector Development and Governance* 7, no. 1 (2024): 130–54.

<sup>25</sup> Phelista Wangui Njeru and Mwangi Peter Wanderi, "Unemployment Intervention in Africa: A Case Study on Mount Kenya University's Graduate Enterprise Academy," in *Enterprise and Economic Development in Africa* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2021), 211–26; Modeni M Sibanda and Liezel Lues, "Public Participation Power Dynamics in Strategic Development Planning in a Metropolitan Municipality: Eastern Cape Province," *Journal of Local Government Research and Innovation* 2 (2021): 44.

<sup>26</sup> Nasrnia and Ashktorab, "Sustainable Livelihood Framework-Based Assessment of Drought Resilience Patterns of Rural Households of Bakhtegan Basin, Iran."

Effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanisms are essential for assessing policy outcomes and ensuring accountability.<sup>27</sup> Internal audits, stakeholder workshops, and quarterly reports have been identified as best practices in policy assessment.<sup>28</sup> However, a study by Eresia-Eke and Boadu found that monitoring and evaluation systems often face limitations in rural areas due to inadequate capacity and resources.<sup>29</sup> According to Adebisi et al, translating policies into local languages and leveraging the support of community leaders for information dissemination can significantly improve public understanding and engagement.<sup>30</sup>

### Limitations of Rural Governance and Policy Execution

Rural governance and policy implementation in South Africa is confronted with shortcomings, such as the lack of coordination between provincial and municipal levels of government, which results in gaps in policy execution and resource allocation highlight is the centralised nature of policy formulation, which sometimes disregards the unique opportunities and challenges that may exist in different local communities.<sup>31</sup> Policies are designed at the provincial level with limited input from local stakeholders such as rural residents and community-based organisations. This top-down approach neglects the spatial diversity and localised needs of rural South Africa, resulting in ineffective implementation and a disconnect between policies and existing realities.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Mabizela and Matsiliza assert that the inefficiencies in governance processes are exacerbated by the lack of robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, making it difficult to track progress and address emerging challenges.<sup>33</sup>

While municipalities and NGOs are usually the primary entities that interact with rural communities, their capacity to execute development initiatives is often constrained by a lack of technical expertise, bureaucratic hurdles, and insufficient funding.<sup>34</sup> Pasquini identify a range of other deficits, such as inadequate leadership, shortage of skills, corruption, and lack of policy alignment, that impede the implementation of municipal developmental strategies.<sup>35</sup> A holistic approach is required to integrate governance processes, community-based planning and policy implementation systems.<sup>36</sup> This study explores the relationships between governance, policy and rural livelihoods in South Africa, aiming to promote a more inclusive and sustainable approach to rural development.

### METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the narratives and perspectives of individuals living in a rural community on governance processes and policy implementation for rural livelihoods and development. The research targeted municipal authorities, community members, traditional leaders, and civil society representatives. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with relevant knowledge in the area of the research topic.

<sup>27</sup> Mubangizi, Betty, C“Monitoring and Evaluation Processes Critical to Service Provision in South Africa’s Rural-Based Municipalities,” *Journal of Reviews on Global Economics* 8 (2019): 555–65.

<sup>28</sup> Nasrnia and Ashktorab, “Sustainable Livelihood Framework-Based Assessment of Drought Resilience Patterns of Rural Households of Bakhtegan Basin, Iran.”

<sup>29</sup> Chukuakadibia E Eresia-Eke and E S Boadu, “Monitoring and Evaluation Preparedness of Public Sector Institutions in South Africa,” *Journal of Reviews on Global Economics* 8 (2019): 532–42.

<sup>30</sup> Foluke Ifejola Adebisi, “Decolonising Education in Africa: Implementing the Right to Education by Re-Appropriating Culture and Indigeneity,” *N. Ir. Legal Q.* 67 (2016): 433.

<sup>31</sup> Matthew Damlola Omojemite, Elphina Nomabandla Cishe, and Mpongwana Zibongiwe, “Gender Stereotyping and Social Norms: Exploring Theoretical Perspectives and Educational Implications,” *Research in Social Sciences and Technology* 9, no. 3 (October 3, 2024): 77–92, <https://doi.org/10.46303/ressat.2024.48>; Gibbens and Cilliers, “ECD Centres as Change Catalysts in Sustainable Rural Livelihood Development: Griekwastad, South Africa, as Case Study.”

<sup>32</sup> Omojemite, Cishe, and Zibongiwe, “Gender Stereotyping and Social Norms: Exploring Theoretical Perspectives and Educational Implications.”

<sup>33</sup> Hlengiwe Mabizela and Noluthando S. Matsiliza, “Uncovering the Gaps in the Provision of Services in the Rural Okhahlamba Municipality of KwaZulu-Natal Province,” *Africa’s Public Service Delivery and Performance Review* 8, no. 1 (December 21, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4102/apsdpr.v8i1.390>.

<sup>34</sup> Hapines Refilwe Makofane and Martinus Selepe, “The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in South Africa with Specific Reference to Rural Development,” *Eurasian Journal of Social Sciences* 10, no. 4 (2022): 262–76.

<sup>35</sup> Lorena Pasquini, Richard Mark Cowling, and Gina Ziervogel, “Facing the Heat: Barriers to Mainstreaming Climate Change Adaptation in Local Government in the Western Cape Province, South Africa,” *Habitat International* 40 (2013): 225–32.

<sup>36</sup> James Dunlop Crichton, *A Theology of Worship in the Study of Liturgy*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold (London: SPCK, 1978).

Data collection involved eleven one-on-one interviews with key informants and two focus group discussions, comprising eight and ten participants, respectively. These discussions occurred in two of the four local municipalities within the Alfred Nzo District municipality. Ethical considerations were strictly followed, ensuring that participation was voluntary and participants' identities were protected. The study used a thematic analysis to examine the interview data and identify key patterns and insights. To maintain accuracy, all collected data were transcribed, verified, and securely stored as Word documents before analysis.

**Ethical approval:** Ethical approval was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee [Ref No: HSSREC/00004560/22].

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study identified several policy documents to support rural livelihoods and development in the Eastern Cape province, particularly in the Alfred Nzo District Municipality. The findings highlight the importance of community participation in policy development, which was facilitated through Integrated Development Plan (IDP) outreach meetings and the 'imbizo' forums that serve as platforms for engaging rural communities in governance and decision-making processes. Mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating policy implementation were identified as critical in ensuring the effectiveness of these policies. The emphasis on disaster preparedness, economic development, and participatory governance underscores the municipality's commitment to rural development, although the city experiences challenges in engaging the community and implementing these policies.

### Disaster Management Policies

Various disaster management policies has been developed to ensure a systematic approach to crisis management at both the district and municipal levels. Participants acknowledged the recently launched Alfred Nzo District Municipality Adaptation Plan.<sup>37</sup> The Plan is designed to guide first responders and equip local governments to effectively respond to emergencies such as pandemics, fires, and floods. The Plan aims to enable local municipalities to react swiftly and minimise the effects of crises on rural communities. Some participants noted that the disaster management framework was available on the website of the District Municipality and that the council had officially adopted it. This accessibility fosters transparency and ensures that residents, including business owners and other stakeholders, know the emergency protocols in place. The following excerpts confirm the accessibility of emergency protocols in ANDM.

*Participant 5: We have the fire and rescue policies that are around in response during the seasons of the prevalence of fire disasters. There are many policies. I think there are many policies that we have.*

*Participant 4: There are policies available that talk about what can be done, like bylaws. They are shareable. You can get them from the websites. You can get them from the archives of the municipality – bylaws, policies – even in the offices of the counsellors, or those offices, but the council offices. The documents for whatever needs to be done to improve their livelihoods are there.*

The available frameworks demonstrate the institutional readiness in rural areas that are particularly vulnerable to natural and man-made disasters. However, participant 4 raised a critical issue regarding accessibility: the policies that exist are not always available in local languages.

*But what I can say is that not all of them are written in local languages. Yes, most of them are written in English.*

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<sup>37</sup> CSIR, *Alfred Nzo District Municipality Adaptation Plan* (Climate and Disaster Resilience Fund, Santam & Alfred Nzo District Municipality, 2024), [https://greenbook.co.za/documents/AlfredNzo\\_AdaptationPlan\\_Jul2024.pdf](https://greenbook.co.za/documents/AlfredNzo_AdaptationPlan_Jul2024.pdf).

Gibbens and Cilliers point out that a language barrier can limit the public's understanding of policy and, subsequently, their ability to follow the protocols specified in the policy, which could delay or impede the effective implementation of these policies during emergencies.<sup>38</sup>

### Local Economic Development Policies

Policies supporting LED help to improve rural livelihoods by promoting Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).<sup>39</sup> These initiatives aim to diversify income sources, create jobs, and establish resilient local economies capable of withstanding external shocks such as economic recessions or natural disasters. Participants emphasised the significance of LED policies in reflecting local government's efforts to ensure sustainable business operations in rural areas and facilitate rapid recovery from crises. Informal trading policies and SME development initiatives are some of the specific frameworks mentioned to strengthen rural economic activity. One participant observed the following:

*Participant 6: We have an LED plan for how to develop this community economically. We have an informal trading policy, starting with the people who sell on the street –because the economy starts with those who sell apples. We have a trading policy that talks about recognising the institution as government because our economy depends on informal people: the saloons, the people that cook on the street. We also have SMMEs development policies.*

Although it was positive that these policies existed, participants reported that it was challenging to disseminate and implement them. As they were produced in English and were not available in the local language, they were of limited usefulness to rural residents. Mawela et al. note that South Africa has 11 official languages, which hinders the effective delivery of government services in citizens' preferred languages, and in many rural communities, particularly those with low literacy rates, some individuals rely on important information being communicated to them orally by community leaders.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, some of the participants in this study reported that many people in their community were unaware of the support services they were entitled to under existing policies. For instance, municipal business support services that are available to assist rural entrepreneurs in registering businesses or accessing funding are often underutilised because the information is not effectively disseminated to those who need it. This lack of effective communication by the municipality results in a lack of awareness of its constituents, which in turn prevents them from accessing resources designed to foster economic resilience and disaster preparedness.

### Community Participation in Policy Development

The findings of this study indicate that involving communities in policy formulation is helpful to ensure that the policy is aligned with local circumstances and needs. Participants also stressed that the community must approve of a policy before they will agree to follow it. Below are excerpts from the interviews and focus group discussions with municipal officials.

*Participant 5: I think what is also important to mention is that the public does contribute. We host public participation processes around our policies, like policies from municipal health and disaster. As well as the bylaws, because we also have bylaws that are customised for our communities. So, they do contribute. We do public participation processes. We give that time for the public to participate before the bylaws are implemented.*

*Participant 6: We also have the imbizo by the mayor. We also have the IDP outreach programs where the mayor goes out to people to hear about their needs. People decide how they prioritise, whether they want roads, halls or water. This goes to the IGR forum, actively participate with*

<sup>38</sup> Gibbens and Cilliers, "ECD Centres as Change Catalysts in Sustainable Rural Livelihood Development: Griekwastad, South Africa, as Case Study."

<sup>39</sup> Tajuddin and Mulang, "Local Economic Resilience: A Qualitative Study of Development Innovation in Rural Areas."

<sup>40</sup> Matshidiso Joyce Taole and Ailwei Solomon Mawela, "A Reflective Practice Approach: Reimagining Teachers' Continuing Professional Development," in *Teacher Professional Knowledge and Development for Reflective and Inclusive Practices* (Routledge, 2017), 36–44.

*IGR forums. Even the stakeholders have stakeholder engagement. Stakeholders' engagement is the council of churches, and we have traditional councils. Those are the engagements.*

Participants noted that platforms such as outreach initiatives led by the mayor and *Imbizo* programmes allow residents to advocate for their development priorities, including infrastructure needs. Additionally, sector-specific consultations, such as working with farmers to shape agricultural policies, ensure the cultural relevance and technical soundness of municipal planning by blending local knowledge and modern expertise. Public participation ensures that disaster management strategies, municipal health policies and bylaws are relevant and tailored to the local context.<sup>41</sup>

Despite these positive efforts toward ensuring community participation, some participation is seen as more procedural than impactful, accentuating the need for deeper community engagement. This finding is supported by Mawela and Twinomurinzi, who state that South Africa's emphasis on citizens' involvement in the development of the policy framework has not translated into practical service delivery outcomes that correspond to the needs and priorities they have articulated.<sup>42</sup>

### **Mechanisms for Monitoring and Evaluation of Policy Implementation**

Given the guidelines in the Municipal Systems Act, District municipalities in South Africa have robust mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of policy that ensure accountability. The policy monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that participants identified included municipal oversight, crisis management, annual reviews, and policy conferences. These findings indicated that the Alfred Nzo District Municipality has well-structured mechanisms in place that ensure continuous monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of policy.

*Participant 1: So, once every quarter you have to report if there was an intervention that you made. And then, for monitoring, there are those council committees – like your municipal public accounts committee – where they can check, through their checks and balances. There is also an internal auditor who does the auditing review on a monthly basis.*

*Participant 3: There are other ways of monitoring, because, by the time we take it to the policy conference, it has already been identified that it isn't working. Policies are monitored to check if they are working or not.*

*We go and present to the standing committees in which we sit in. There's a standing committee for departments. For example, there's a standing committee for budget and treasury. Councillors also sit on these standing committees. So, you will present at the policy conference where all our policies are reviewed, and it will sit sometime in June. There, we sit in the broader standing committee where everyone interrogates the policies.*

Some participants mentioned that the annual review of policies takes place through workshops that involve key stakeholders. It was also noted that the involvement of senior officials, such as municipal managers and mayors, informs swift decision-making in crises and avoids bureaucratic delays. The study shows that inclusivity is central to policymaking as participants acknowledged the socio-economic diversity of the rural district municipalities.<sup>43</sup>

The findings thus revealed the structured nature of policy implementation at Alfred Nzo District Municipality, characterised by political leadership and administrators having defined roles and responsibilities.

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<sup>41</sup> Gibbens and Cilliers, "ECD Centres as Change Catalysts in Sustainable Rural Livelihood Development: Griekwastad, South Africa, as Case Study."

<sup>42</sup> Tendani Mawela, Nixon Muganda Ochara, and Hossana Twinomurinzi, "E-Government Implementation: A Reflection on South African Municipalities," *South African Computer Journal* 29, no. 1 (2017): 147–71.

<sup>43</sup> Birkmann et al., "Poverty, Livelihoods and Sustainable Development."



## Community Participation in Decision-Making

The *Imbizo* initiatives and the mayor's Integrated Development Plan outreach activities are identified by respondents as vital means of empowering communities to voice their priorities and address concerns regarding essential infrastructure and services such as water and roads. These initiatives ensure that community preferences are integrated into government planning frameworks. The findings highlight ward committees and local governance structures as key mechanisms for community participation. However, while these structures exist, limited community engagement remains a challenge, often restricting meaningful input in policy formulation and implementation. Although platforms for participation, such as community meetings and consultation programs, are available, the level of engagement is relatively low and remains inconsistent. A participant mentioned that:

*Participant 1: I personally feel that it can be better. I'm not sure whether it's the lack of civic education from our community structure side, the local municipalities, or the government, in general. But I feel like people are not really involved in government matters as they should be. Or maybe it's the strategies that the municipalities are using to communicate community outreach activities. There are laws that we're supposed to follow – to ensure that public participation, consultation or decision-making is done together with the communities. But you'll find that maybe there are just 20 members of that particular community, which is supposed to have, like, 3,000. So I feel like we could do better there.*

*Participant 5: They take part in the IDP, representing forums and also through the community-based training that takes place when we are in the process of developing our IDPs. But what I cannot assure you of is the level of participation. And, you know, as I have mentioned, sometimes they come there as if they think they are just there to sign attendance registers, not understanding that they should be looking into those documents and policies.*

Participants observed that some individuals merely sign the attendance register without actively engaging in decision-making. This suggests a lack of understanding of the purpose and importance of their participation in policy planning and implementation processes.

## Decision-Making through Ward Committees and Local Structures

Rural communities engage in decision-making through ward committees and community-based planning structures, which are designed to bring governance closer to the people. These mechanisms aim to ensure that residents have a platform to voice their concerns and contribute to local development. One participant highlighted the significance of ward-level meetings, noting that such initiatives enhance accessibility and encourage participation by bringing decision-making processes directly to communities.

*Participant 3: These programmes are brought by the speaker, and people respect programmes by the speaker because it is rare for the speaker to engage. We bring these engagements to where people stay, even cluster wards, where necessary.*

*Participant 7: The municipality has a belief in community-based planning. We are operating in an executive ward participatory system. As such, the municipality has 320 committees, which are 10 per ward. We have 32 wards, which are part of community-based planning and development. The development is channelled through these committees and vice versa. The issues on the ground also create a conduit of information between the municipality and the community members working with ward councillors.*

The participants stressed the importance of formal structures to facilitate community participation in local governance. These structures, such as the office of the speaker, play an important role in ensuring that public perspectives are heard and taken into consideration in decision-making processes. The speaker manages various public engagement programs that strengthen the connection between the community

and municipal leadership. Enhancing the visibility and accessibility of these structures is essential to improve their effectiveness and foster meaningful participation.<sup>44</sup>

### **Challenges Hindering the Effective Implementation of Rural Development Policies and their Impact on Communities' Livelihoods**

This section explores the key obstacles that impede the successful implementation of rural development policies, ultimately affecting the livelihoods of rural communities. The findings reveal several challenges, including low policy awareness, inadequate stakeholder engagement, language barriers, resource constraints, and bureaucratic inefficiencies. These barriers not only limit policy effectiveness but also hinder community participation and access to development opportunities. The following excerpts from interviews and focus group discussions provide deeper insights into these challenges.

#### ***Lack of Policy awareness and Stakeholder Engagement***

A recurring challenge mentioned in the interviews is that rural residents are often unaware of municipal services and opportunities. As highlighted by Participant 1, below, many community members were unaware that the municipality could assist with initiatives like accessing funding or business development. Findings from the study suggest that the lack of awareness is compounded by low literacy levels and poor communication channels, which leave programs such as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) underutilised.

*Participant 1: Their role (municipality) is just to give people information freely, to be accountable to the people about the development of the policy. In fact, to inform people, they must know that no one is making a decision for them. From the decision stages, they should be the ones who are prioritising projects to be done in the communities to make follow-ups on them. ... It is the role of the municipality to ensure that all stakeholders are equally informed and given quality and fair services.*

*Participant 2: When these policies are being developed, people must have an appreciation of these policies as their own policies, so that when they are implemented. We must understand why they were developed, and we must make sure that public participation is thorough and meaningful so that people can help, instead of having them as a barrier to the policies that need to be implemented.*

*Participant 4: There are policies available that talk about what can be done, like bylaws. They are shareable. You can get them from the websites. You can get them from the archives of the municipality, bylaws, policies, even in the offices of the counsellors or those offices, or the council offices. The documents for whatever needs to be done to improve their livelihoods are there.*

However, participants agreed that policy documents are frequently unavailable in local or indigenous languages.

This makes it challenging for rural populations to understand the content, thereby limiting their ability to engage meaningfully in discussions and decision-making processes. The knowledge gap hinders rural residents' ability to access resources designed to improve their livelihoods. Lebenya *et al* argue that to overcome these challenges, improved communication strategies are needed that include culturally appropriate outreach programs, partnerships with local leaders, and the use of accessible communication channels to ensure that information reaches all sectors of the rural population.<sup>45</sup>

#### ***Limited Power to enforce Policies***

While policies may exist, the municipality often lacks the legal mandate to enforce them. As explained by one of the participants, municipalities must depend on other governmental institutions to enforce

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<sup>44</sup> Birkmann et al., "Poverty, Livelihoods and Sustainable Development."

<sup>45</sup> Moroosi Lebenya, Betty C Mubangizi, and Oluwaseun Temitope Ojogiwa, "Participatory Communication for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods," *Institutiones Administrationis-J. Admin. Sci.* 4 (2024): 72.

regulations such as environmental health standards and building safety codes. The lack of capacity to enforce municipal policies diminishes their effectiveness and exposes communities to various risks.

Participant 3: *We are not law enforcers; we still need other departments to help us enforce. Like with wildfires, we cannot do anything with those that do. For example, environmental health officials sometimes want to close shops with old food but at times, they can't even close the shop. As much as we have the policies, we are not law enforcers. We tell people not to stay in buildings that are not good for living in. We have to ask another department to help with the enforcement.*

Financial constraints pose a significant challenge for rural municipalities and limit their capacity to effectively implement development projects, like adaptation schemes.<sup>46</sup> These funding shortages delay critical projects and restrict municipalities from addressing urgent needs, such as disaster response or sustainability initiatives, exacerbating the vulnerability of the community. Moreover, without robust enforcement mechanisms, policies will remain largely theoretical, with limited tangible benefits to communities.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Impact of Bureaucracy on Policy Implementation and Resource Distribution**

The study found that bureaucracy is a significant obstacle to policy implementation. Rigid frameworks that fail to address the unique conditions of rural areas can lead to delays and inefficiencies in service delivery. The participants noted that:

Participant 6: *That red tape I mentioned: because, sometimes, policies cut across several municipalities and a policy meant for Johannesburg cannot be implemented in Ntabankulu. Also, one other thing is the challenge of an equitable share. The way it is being done disadvantages us, because we are the most disadvantaged municipality, but we have little funding. They don't look at who needs resources the most. For instance, there are limited resources in terms of finances that deal with disasters.*

Policymakers must ensure flexibility and responsiveness to rural needs. Hence, streamlining bureaucratic processes can improve the speed and efficacy of development interventions for rural communities. Some participants also observed that funding allocations often favour urban areas and leave rural municipalities under-resourced despite facing more significant developmental challenges. This imbalance creates a cycle of poverty and underdevelopment and limits access to essential services and infrastructure. Equitable distribution of resources is vital to provide the infrastructure and services necessary for sustainable development in rural regions.<sup>48</sup>

### **Politicisation of Development Initiatives and Lack of Coordination**

Respondents drew attention to the influence of political biases in resource allocation, where ruling party members often benefit disproportionately. This practice undermines equitable development and creates mistrust within communities. Depoliticising resource distribution is essential to ensure fair distribution and access to development benefits for all community members, regardless of their political affiliations, as the following participant noted.

Participant 7: *Politicised development seems to be the challenge in local government. Everything is politicised, and people believe in politics. You know, people, when they are depending on the government. But self-sustainable people do not depend fully on the government and the politics of the day. So that's a challenge of the current situation because everything is politicised – even if, as a government, you call the meeting. Those who are perceived to be ruling the party will demand to be the beneficiaries of all such services, whereas it's what is supposed to cater for everyone. For example, if there's a disaster. Sometimes, you get a challenge that those ward committees who are politically aligned will overlook those who are not aligned with the ruling party. In the process, it affects livelihoods.*

<sup>46</sup> Birkmann et al., “Poverty, Livelihoods and Sustainable Development.”

<sup>47</sup> Birkmann et al., “Poverty, Livelihoods and Sustainable Development.”

<sup>48</sup> Birkmann et al., “Poverty, Livelihoods and Sustainable Development.”

Poor coordination among governmental departments was identified as a hindrance to effective policy implementation. A fragmented approach, where departments often operate independently rather than aligning their efforts through platforms like the Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), results in disjointed development initiatives and inefficient service delivery.

### **The Roles of Local Governmental Institutions and NGOs in the Implementation of Development Policy**

This study examined the significant roles that local government and NGOs play in the implementation and evaluation of development initiatives. The municipality extends the reach of policy implementation through partnerships with NGOs, creating an enabling environment for policy implementation, tracking and evaluating policy outcomes and sustaining collaboration for long-term impact. In this regard, Participant 6, who works for an NGO, stated:

*We are the implementers, and the municipality monitors us to make sure that these policies are implementable and they have an impact.*

Thus, effective collaboration between entities is necessary to ensure that policies yield meaningful results and improvements in rural areas. While local governments spearhead policy development and implementation, NGOs often act as essential collaborators, particularly in building capacity, raising awareness and mobilising resources. NGOs specialise in targeted areas such as education, disaster readiness, and healthcare and complement government efforts to broaden their reach and maximise their impact. These contributions address gaps in delivery by the government and ensure that rural populations have access to the necessary support to improve their living conditions.

### **Ways to enhance the Resilience of Rural Communities and ensuring Sustainable Recovery from Pandemics and Disasters**

The findings of this study yielded valuable strategies for enhancing collaborative planning that actively involves community members and promotes accountability, inclusive solutions, capacity building, resilience, and sustainable recovery. Furthermore, these strategies address structural challenges, such as economic diversification, policy accessibility, infrastructure development and climate change adaptation. These strategies highlight the importance of promoting synergies between policymakers and rural communities to create inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable systems that can withstand disruptions and promote long-term development.

#### ***Culturally Sensitive and Inclusive planning for Resilience***

The findings underscore the need for collaborative planning that actively involves all members of a community to ensure equitable distribution of resources and services. It was highlighted that culturally appropriate strategies that reflect the needs of diverse community groups are required. As also highlighted by Van Osch and Gawaya the inclusion of the voices of people with disabilities and LGBTQIA members in IDPs can prevent marginalisation and enhance resilience.<sup>49</sup>

Participant 1: *But if we planned together and we knew how many we are, we would be able to ensure that 50 people who are living there get this service. Yes. ... And if everyone were able to sit at the table with the government that they choose or because they are the government themselves in a democratic state, then they could plan properly and be resilient. So it is not easy when there's a disaster and there is no knowledge of what the infrastructure we have can be strong enough to withstand.*

Participant 3: *We know the communities have people who are from different cultures. Let us say we are going to assist after a pandemic or disaster: we must consider that there are different groups of people and make sure everyone is catered for properly. We have the LGBTQIA community, disabled people and people who cannot stay with others. Let's make an example of*

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<sup>49</sup> Thera van Osch and Rose Gawaya, "South Africa Gender Country Profile," 2021.

*resilience. When we give houses to people, let's not give them temporary structures or bridges that are not strong enough. Whatever you bring must make people's lives easier and survive better.*

Therefore, risk-aware solutions that integrate diverse perspectives are essential for equitable development and disaster recovery efforts.

### **Promoting Education and Capacity Building**

A key theme emerging from the discussion is the importance of education and capacity building in strengthening community resilience to disasters. One participant emphasises that proactive efforts, such as training, information dissemination, and awareness programs.

*Participant 5: I think it boils down to one thing that I've been talking about: it is capacity building, information, and training of our communities on them or on the protective factors. You know? What can they do to protect themselves should such disasters, you know, prevail? What should they do in terms of building their homes? We can't just have plots that are on wetlands. You know what I mean? Yes. A lot needs to be done to educate people before the disaster strikes.*

Training communities in practices that boost their self-protection capacity and resilience is recognised as a vital element for disaster preparedness and mitigating the impact of disasters in rural areas.<sup>50</sup> Collaboration with research institutions and universities could generate innovative, evidence-based solutions to recurring challenges. Such partnerships could provide valuable insights into local hazards and support the development of sustainable, long-term strategies. Another key issue raised in the discussion is the need for stronger collaboration between communities and institutions of higher learning to address recurring hazards more effectively. The quote below stresses the urgency of investing in research, particularly on predictable hazards like wildfires, to develop evidence-based mitigation strategies:

*Focus group participant: I think we need to double our efforts in connection with the institutions of our higher learning, because we have got a situation where, for more than 5 to 10 years, we have been hit hard by the same kind of hazard. That is, the kind of research required has not been attained, so we can come up with a very informed solution. I think the research aspect is needed. For instance, particularly when we talk of wildfires, it's something that we know at a particular season will affect us, but we cannot say this is the kind of effort that will withstand the kind of impact and the effects. I think the issue of research is lacking.*

### **Responsible Leadership and more Accessible Policies**

The complex language and structure that is often used in policy documents presents a barrier to members of the public accessing the content of the document; this is particularly true in rural areas where many individuals are illiterate.<sup>51</sup> It is thus necessary to simplify policy documents and ensure that they are translated into the languages that are spoken by constituents, to enable communities to read and understand policy documents and contribute to their implementation. A critical challenge highlighted in the discussion is the accessibility of policy documents to local communities. One participant stresses that policies often remain high-level documents that are difficult for the general public to understand, particularly due to language barriers and varying literacy levels.

*Participant 5: When you talk about a policy, most of the time, the policy becomes just a high-level document, which makes it difficult for our people to understand. I think the literacy level of our people becomes a barrier. Okay. Because some of the policies are written in English. So, a lot needs to be done in unpacking the policies to them – to the native languages of our people, so that they can understand. We should be meeting them halfway by capacitating and equipping them with the information and simplifying it. And, also, we, as government officials, should be moving, coming down to their level.*

<sup>50</sup> Fayaz Gul Mazloum Yar and Majid Yasouri, "Rural Development Challenges in Addition to Effective Solutions to Overcome Obstacles," *Zhongguo Kuangye Daxue Xuebao* 29, no. 3 (2024): 79–90.

<sup>51</sup> Sibanda and Lues, "Public Participation Power Dynamics in Strategic Development Planning in a Metropolitan Municipality: Eastern Cape Province."

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework offers the perspective that place-based development can enable a holistic and contextually relevant approach to rural planning by integrating social, human, natural, physical, and financial capital to strengthen local economies and governance systems. Prioritising local efforts and reinforcing localised decision-making structures is important to balance community-driven initiatives against centralised policy frameworks. Achieving this balance necessitates strengthening the agency of rural communities and enhancing their relationships with institutions to enable them to participate actively in shaping the policies and interventions that impact their lives. The interconnectedness of local initiatives, NGO initiatives, and broader governance systems must be leveraged to develop sustainable and inclusive rural livelihood strategies that are responsive to both the immediate needs and long-term development goals of rural communities.

Given the increasing susceptibility of rural communities to unprecedented livelihood challenges, rural populations must be placed at the centre of livelihood planning. The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework reinforces the importance of participatory, inclusive, and adaptive planning that enables communities to actively shape their own development trajectories. Enhancing the participation of rural communities requires collaboration between planning professionals, researchers, NGOs, and policymakers, all of whom must work to empower communities with the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to sustain their livelihoods. By fostering inclusive governance structures and enabling rural communities to harness their assets effectively, sustainable livelihoods can be strengthened, ensuring long-term resilience, equity, and sustainable development.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between policy frameworks and community engagement with rural governance and livelihood improvement through the lens of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF). The challenges faced by rural communities, particularly in navigating pandemics and disasters, highlight the importance of resilience-building strategies that align with local realities while bridging the gap between top-down policy objectives and community-driven needs. The findings emphasise the necessity of micro-level planning within the South African rural context, underscoring the potential of place-based rural livelihood development as a means to enhance sustainability, adaptability, and long-term resilience. By focusing on localised, community-centred approaches, rural development initiatives can better address the vulnerabilities of rural populations, optimise existing livelihood assets, and enhance the ability of rural communities to withstand external shocks.

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#### **ABOUT AUTHOR**

Betty Claire Mubangizi holds a Doctor of Public Administration and is a full Professor in Public Administration. Recognised as a rated and established researcher by South Africa's National Research Foundation, she occupies the NRF/Research Chair in Sustainable Rural Livelihoods at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Prof. Mubangizi is the Editor of the African Journal of Governance and Development and a member of the International Steering Committee ICSD Conference in Rome.