

What is ‘Rural’ in South Africa, and Why Does it Matter?

<https://doi.org/10.36369/2616-9045/2023/v12i2a1>

Online ISSN: 2616-9045. Print ISSN: 2218-5615

BETTY MUBANGIZI

NRF SARChI – Chair Sustainable Local (Rural) Livelihoods

School of Management, IT and Governance

College of Law and Management Studies

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Mubangizib@ukzn.ac.za

The term ‘rurality’ has no universal definition and varies across geographical and temporal dimensions. What is deemed rural in the Global North may vastly differ from rural conceptions in the Global South, indicating a profound disparity in socio-economic and cultural contexts. Furthermore, the passage of time alters the perception of rurality; areas once considered rural may now be on the urban fringe, transformed by the spread of cities and infrastructure.

In South Africa, the heterogeneity of rural landscapes is particularly pronounced. The notion of the rural encompasses the expanse of vast commercial agricultural lands held under freehold tenure, reflecting a more conventional Western perspective of rural spaces. Yet, it also encompasses scattered settlements woven across communal lands, embodying a unique rural identity. These communal areas starkly contrast commercial farms regarding population density, land ownership and socio economic occurrences.

This diversity within South Africa’s rural tapestry defies simplistic categorisation. It reflects a broader spectrum of rural realities, from the solitary expanses of mechanised agriculture to the dense networks of community-driven, subsistence living. Each embodies its form of ‘rurality,’ shaped by history, economics, and the community’s relationship with the land. Recognising this complexity is crucial for any discourse on rural development and policy-making, as it underscores the need for nuanced approaches sensitive to the varied rural experiences within the country’s borders. Various governmental and non-governmental entities interpret the term through distinct lenses influenced by their objectives and operational contexts. The South African Constitution refrains from segregating rural and urban areas within its framework for local governance, leaving the distinction to more specific legislative instruments.



The Municipal Structures Act 117 of 1998 delineates urban areas with characteristics of high density, significant movement and economic activity, and extensive development, including multiple business and industrial areas. By default, areas not fitting this urban description are categorised under B and C municipal classifications, encompassing district and local municipalities. This implicit binary is somewhat expanded by the Municipal Infrastructure Investment Framework (MIIF7), which differentiates between commercially viable freehold lands and communal lands managed under traditional authorities, highlighting distinct socio-economic landscapes within the rural context.

The Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs further refines this categorisation, employing a range of indicators such as poverty prevalence, service accessibility, and budgetary considerations to assort municipalities into seven distinct categories. This classification is not mirrored in the country's constitution but is instrumental in directing governance and development efforts.

The MIIF's framework is particularly insightful, dividing rural municipalities into B3 and B4 categories, each with unique characteristics and challenges that necessitate tailored policy interventions. The National Treasury's Budget Review of 2019 reveals that most households in B4 municipalities reside in traditional communal settlements, often in former homelands like Transkei and Ciskei, and depend heavily on public assistance and remittances due to limited economic opportunities.

Contrastingly, B3 municipalities display a more diverse economic profile with a noteworthy contribution from commercial agriculture to the local gross value added. Such differentiation underscores the non-uniformity of rural areas regarding land ownership, agricultural practices, and sources of income, calling for nuanced and targeted developmental approaches.

Statistics South Africa's financial data echoes the fiscal dependency of rural municipalities on central government grants and subsidies, with B4 municipalities, in particular, receiving a substantial proportion of their revenue through these channels. This underscores the critical need for policies that recognise and address the unique challenges of these municipalities, particularly given their historical context and current socio-economic vulnerabilities.

The demographic, economic, and political weight of rural South Africa is significant, housing a significant population and comprising the vast majority of the nation's land. Despite the post-1994 government's strides, rural locales remain beleaguered by inequality, and unemployment.

Innovative governance and infrastructural achievements offer glimpses of progress, with emergent microenterprises and efforts to improve essential services painting a picture of

burgeoning rural resilience. Yet, the overarching challenge remains to deliver services across geographically dispersed and topographically challenging terrains, constrained by financial limitations and a lean tax base.

Therefore, addressing the rural conundrum necessitates a multi-pronged strategy. This includes exploring alternative revenue avenues, devising innovative service models tailored to the rural fabric, and fostering collaborative governance that can engender transformational leadership. Such leadership must be insightful, empowering, and present, with a clear vision to navigate the unique rural landscape and implement 'rural-sensitive' policies that ensure equitable and contextual development, ultimately enhancing working and living conditions of the broader rural populace.

Pockets of Excellence

In the evolving landscape of South Africa's rural areas, vestiges of traditional life are giving way to new forms of dwelling and enterprise. Home dwellings, once epitomised by thatched roofs, are increasingly changing to modern corrugated 'zinc' roofing and even grand Tuscan-style homes. This transformation speaks to a broader theme of progress and innovation in rural municipalities. Noteworthy are the 'pockets of excellence'—local successes where collaborative partnerships, effective network governance, and the seamless integration of traditional leadership have catalysed development. A few microenterprises have burgeoned, tapping into the rural economy with agriculture, brickmaking, and livestock farming activities. The extension of the electric grid to rural areas is a notable and commendable pocket of excellence, with it, could come viable enterprises. Despite fiscal limitations, some rural municipalities have made laudable strides in provisioning essential services such as water and sanitation, albeit with the acknowledgement that comprehensive utility systems may remain aspirational due to financial and logistical constraints imposed by the rural topography..

The Rural-urban Nexus

The nexus between rural and urban dynamics demands a nuanced understanding. Urbanisation, often driven by the quest for improved services and opportunities, beckons rural inhabitants to cities, precipitating a demographic shift. This move, while seeking to fulfil individual aspirations, potentially depletes rural regions of their working-age population, thereby affecting the local socio-economic fabric. To mitigate this, an inclusive development strategy is imperative—one that recognises and strengthens the rural-urban continuum. It should be noted that rural-urban migration is not a problem to be curbed and can be harnessed for mutual benefit if those arriving from rural areas do so with relevant skills and education to significantly contribute to the development goals of cities.



This way, people from rural areas need not live on the fringes of urban life but become integral participants in the city's growth and prosperity.

Resource allocation emerges as a pivotal challenge; the absence of development in rural areas may perpetuate rural-urban migration. Strategic investment in rural infrastructure and services is vital to redress this imbalance and encourage sustainable growth within these communities.

Moreover, the enduring ties between rural migrants and their rural homes—manifest in financial remittances, cultural practices, and familial bonds—underscore the indispensability of a holistic approach that bridges the rural-urban divide. Ignoring these connections risks oversimplifying the complex interplay of social and economic factors that define rural life.

The Challenges are Structural.

The constant question of why rural areas remain underserved can be attributed to several factors. Though some are historical and others related to climatic factors, there are current challenges requiring attention. First, the challenging terrains and geographical expanses present formidable barriers to service delivery. Secondly, financial constraints, amplified by high unemployment rates, curtail the revenue-generating capacity of rural municipalities, undermining their ability to self-fund critical services and infrastructure. Furthermore, the reliance on national treasury allocations leaves these regions vulnerable, as these funds may fall short of meeting the substantial needs for infrastructural development. Thus, a recalibration of public policy and resource distribution is essential to address these multifaceted challenges. It necessitates a concerted effort to foster rural resilience, ensuring that rural communities can thrive independently and contribute to the nation's fabric as equal partners in progress.

Why does it matter?

Understanding the concept of 'rural' in South Africa is more than an academic exercise; it is crucial for several compelling reasons that impact the country's socio-economic development, governance, and the well-being of its people.

Rural areas have economic implications: Rural areas in South Africa are not mere backdrops to the country's vibrant urban centres; they are active economic players. The agricultural activities that predominate these areas are the backbone of the South African food system and a significant source of employment. Recognising the economic potential of rural South Africa is essential for targeted policy interventions that can stimulate growth, support sustainable agriculture, and foster broader economic development.



Rural areas hold cultural significance: Rural regions are custodians of rich cultural heritage and diversity. They are the keepers of traditions and indigenous knowledge systems that are integral to the South African identity. Preserving these cultural landscapes amidst changing economic and social dynamics is vital for maintaining the country's cultural mosaic. Understanding rural communities' unique challenges is essential to implementing equitable policies that bridge the urban-rural divide, ensuring that all South Africans have access to the opportunities and benefits of development.

Rural areas are environmental stewards: The interdependence of rural communities and their natural environments in South Africa cannot be overstated. These areas are often nestled within ecologically sensitive zones, cradling river systems that serve as the lifeblood of the local ecosystems and communities. These waterways provide essential resources for daily life and agriculture and support diverse biological networks that contribute to the overall health of the country's biodiversity. As such, it is vital to develop and implement environmental policies that ensure rural practices adapt to changing climatic conditions, protect against overexploitation, and maintain the ecological integrity of these river systems.

Rural areas have implications for the form and function of governance and service delivery: Defining 'rural' directly affects governance structures and resource allocation. Service delivery can be misdirected without a clear understanding of what constitutes a rural area, and development initiatives may fail to meet the community's needs. This clarity is crucial for ensuring that governance and service delivery are effective and responsive to the local context.

Demographic considerations in rural areas: Statistics suggest a gradual decline in South Africa's rural populace compared to its urban counterpart. However, many South Africans still live in rural areas, and their prosperity is intricately linked to the country's collective well-being and economic success. Ignoring the needs of these rural communities could intensify social inequalities and impede South Africa's development.

The definition of 'rural' in South Africa matters because it shapes the lens through which the nation views and addresses the issues pertinent to a significant segment of its land and people. It informs the strategies that will either uplift or continue to marginalise these communities. By placing the 'rural' at the heart of national development, South Africa can strive towards an inclusive, equitable, and respectful future of its diverse landscapes and legacies.

In concluding this opinion piece, it is pertinent to note that the views expressed herein are deeply rooted in years of dedicated research and practical involvement in rural livelihoods. The writer, who holds the NRF/Chair in Sustainable Rural Livelihoods, draws upon extensive experience working within the Alfred Nzo District Municipality of Eastern Cape



province and supervising senior students. These perspectives are further enriched and substantiated by the Chair's academically published work, which delves into the nuances of rural dynamics and development. For those seeking a deeper understanding and additional insights into these matters, the Chair's published research serves as a valuable resource, offering a comprehensive exploration of the complexities that shape rural life and the policies that govern it.