

# Community Engagement, Governance, and Policy Implementation for Resilient Rural Livelihoods in South Africa

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## 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. However, their impact is often limited by gaps in policy formulation, weak implementation, and inadequate participation by the affected community. 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 South Africa's Alfred Nzo District Municipality. Data was collected during eleven interviews and two focus group discussions. The findings highlight the importance of micro-level, place-based development integrating community-driven initiatives with broader policy frameworks. The study found 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, this paper makes 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.*

**Keywords:** Sustainable livelihoods; rural governance; community resilience; disaster preparedness; policy implementation

## Introduction

Rural livelihoods are fundamental to a nation's socio-economic character. Rural livelihoods contribute to the strength of the economy, particularly in regions where agriculture, small enterprises, and informal economies dominate (Moyo, 2016). In South Africa, a significant portion of the rural populace relies on state grants, small-scale trade and agriculture, contributing substantially to the nation's economic growth (Mathinya et al., 2023). Despite the important 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 (Chirisa & Nel, 2022; Higuera et al., 2023; Yar & Yasouri, 2024). According to Stats SA (2017), South Africa's rural communities experience pervasive poverty, which affects the most vulnerable and economically disadvantaged populations the most severely. These communities contend with numerous challenges, including geographic isolation, the depletion of natural resources, food insecurity, societal disintegration and unresolved land tenure disputes. Duale (2024) and Adebayo (2024) 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 (Yu et al., 2024). In light of these challenges, policies intended to support rural communities, such as Local Economic Development (LED) initiatives and disaster management strategies, are essential to enhance resilience and sustainable development (Tajuddin & Mulang, 2024). Salvia and Quaranta (2017) 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. 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 (Birkmann et al., 2022).

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 (Gibbens & Schoeman, 2020). 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 important 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 enhancing the impact of rural development programs and ensuring that resources and opportunities reach the most vulnerable populations. Moreover, Siddle and Koelble (2017) 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 increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, which impact water availability, food security and agricultural production.

Disaster management and local economic development (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 (Gibbens & Schoeman, 2020). 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 (Makaya et al., 2020). 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 (Dushkova & Ivlieva, 2024; Yu et al., 2024). 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 translating 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.

### **The Sustainable Rural Livelihoods Framework**

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 (Natarajan et al., 2022). 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 (Nasrnia & Ashktorab, 2021). A sustainable livelihood can cope with and recover from external pressures without compromising the natural resource base or the livelihoods of future generations (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Scoones, 1998). This concept is widely used in development studies to analyse poverty reduction strategies and inform policy interventions (Ellis, 2000).

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 (2021) 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 inefficiencies. The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework highlights the need for localised and participatory planning, ensuring that rural development policies align with community realities (Asegie et al., 2021). 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 (Nasrnia & Ashktorab, 2021). This perspective highlights the importance of bridging the gap between policy frameworks and community

agency 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 (2020) identified barriers such as limited access to information and language constraints as key factors weakening policy implementation. 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 (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation provides a foundational framework for understanding levels of public participation, ranging from tokenistic consultation to genuine empowerment. According to Gibbens and Cilliers (2023), South Africa supports community-based planning through the Integrated Development Planning (IDP) process, which happens at the level of government. 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 (Musitha, 2016; Simelane & Nohumba, 2024). 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. (2021) and Sibanda and Lues (2021) emphasise the significance of participatory governance in rural areas where the role of traditional knowledge and local context is critical. 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 (2021) 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. 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.

Effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanisms are essential for assessing policy outcomes and ensuring accountability (Mubangizi, 2019). Internal audits, stakeholder workshops and quarterly reports have been identified as best practices in policy assessment (Nasrnia & Ashktorab, 2021). However, a study by Eresia-Eke and Boadu (2019) found that monitoring and evaluation systems often face limitations in rural areas due to inadequate capacity and resources. According to Adebisi et al. (2021), translating policies into local languages and leveraging the support of community leaders for information dissemination can significantly improve public understanding and engagement.

## **Limitations of Rural Governance and Policy Execution**

Rural governance and policy implementation in South Africa are 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 (Mpongwana

& Cishe, 2024). A critical issue Gibbens and Cilliers (2023) highlight is the centralised nature of policy formulation, which sometimes disregards the unique opportunities and challenges that may exist in different local communities. 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 (Mpongwana & Cishe, 2024). Moreover, Mabizela and Matsiliza (2020) 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.

While municipalities and NGOs are usually the primary entities interacting with rural communities, their capacity to execute development initiatives is often constrained by a lack of technical expertise, bureaucratic hurdles, and insufficient funding (Makofane & Selepe, 2022). Pasquini et al. (2013) identify a range of other deficits, such as insufficient leadership, a shortage of skills, corruption, and a lack of policy alignment, that impede the implementation of municipal developmental strategies. A holistic approach is required to integrate governance processes, community-based planning and policy implementation systems (Yar & Yasouri, 2024). This study explores the relationships between governance, policy and rural livelihoods in South Africa, 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 research topic.

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 protected.

The study employed 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.

## **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 municipality experiences challenges in engaging the community and implementing these policies.

### ***Disaster Management Policies***

A range of disaster management policies has been developed to ensure a systematic approach to crisis management at both district and municipal levels. Participants acknowledged the recently launched Alfred Nzo District Municipality Adaptation Plan (2024). 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 respond swiftly and minimise the effect of crises on rural communities. Some of the participants noted that the disaster management framework was available on the website of the District Municipality and that it had been officially adopted by the council. This accessibility fosters transparency and ensures that residents – including business owners and other stakeholders – are aware of the emergency protocols in place. The following excerpts confirm the accessibility of emergency protocols in ANDM.

*Participant 5: We do 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 to what can be done, like bylaws. They are sharable. 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.*

Gibbens and Cilliers (2023) 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.

### ***Local Economic Development Policies***

Policies supporting local economic development (LED) help to improve rural livelihoods by promoting Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) (Tajuddin & Mulang, 2024). These initiatives aim to diversify income sources, create jobs, and establish resilient local economies that are 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 that were mentioned as strengthening 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 the people 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 who cook on the street. We also have SMMEs development policy.*

While 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 unavailable in the local language, they were of limited usefulness to rural residents. Mawela et al. (2017) note that the fact that South Africa has 11 official languages hinders the effective delivery of government services in citizens' preferred languages. In many rural communities, particularly those with low literacy rates, some individuals rely on important information being communicated to them orally by community leaders. Moreover, some of the participants in this study reported that many people in their community were unaware of the support services they are entitled to under existing policies. For instance, municipal business support services that 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 on the part of its constituents, which 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 they become implemented bylaws.*

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, where I actively participate. 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 the imbizo programs 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 (Yar & Yasouri, 2024; Gibbens & Cilliers, 2023).

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 (2017), 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.

### ***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 ensured continuous monitor and evaluation of the implementation of policy.

*Participant 1: So, once on a quarterly basis 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. And there is also internal audit 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 with standing committees that 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 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 (Birkmann et al., 2022) as participants acknowledged the socio-economic diversity of the rural district municipalities.

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.

### ***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 or consultation or the 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 (Birkmann et al., 2022).

## 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 limit policy effectiveness and 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 often lack 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 deciding 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 they 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 to what can be done, like bylaws. They are sharable. 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.*

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, limiting their ability to engage meaningfully in discussions and decision-making processes. The knowledge gap hinders rural residents' access to resources designed to improve their livelihoods. Lebenya et al. (2024) argue that to overcome these challenges, improved communication strategies are needed, including culturally appropriate outreach programs, partnerships with local leaders, and accessible communication channels to ensure that information reaches all sectors of the rural population.

### ***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 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 (Birkmann et al., 2022). These funding shortages delay critical projects and restrict municipalities from addressing urgent needs, such as disaster response or sustainability initiatives, exacerbating the community's vulnerability. Moreover, policies will remain largely theoretical without robust enforcement mechanisms, with limited tangible benefit to communities (Yar & Yasouri, 2024).

### ***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 the 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 for dealing 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 (Birkmann et al., 2022).

### ***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 people who are self-sustainable 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 the same as the ruling party. In the process, it affects livelihoods.*

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 implementing and evaluating 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 government delivery gaps and ensure that rural populations have access to the necessary support to improve their living conditions.

### ***Recommendations for Enhancing 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 involve community members and promote 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 community members 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, (2021), the inclusion of the voices of people with disabilities and LGBTQIA members in IDPs can prevent marginalisation and enhance resilience.

*Participant 1: But if we planned together and we knew how many we are, we are able to ensure that 50 people who are living there get this service. Yes. ... And if each and everyone would be 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 can be able to plan properly and be resilient. So it can't be easy when there's a disaster to not know what the infrastructure that we have can also be strong enough to withstand.*

*Participant 3: We know the communities have people who are from different cultures. Let's say we are going to assist after a pandemic or disaster: we must consider 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 resilience. When we take 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's 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 a vital element for disaster preparedness and to mitigate the impact of disasters in rural areas (Yar & Yasouri, 2024). 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. I mean, the kind of research required has not been attained so that we are able to come up with a very informed solution. I think the research aspect is really 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 often used in policy documents present a barrier to members of the public accessing the document's content; this is particularly true in rural areas where many individuals are illiterate (Sibanda & Lues, 2021). Thus, It is necessary to simplify policy documents and ensure that they are translated into the languages 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 stressed that policies often remain high-level documents 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.*

## **Conclusions and Implications of the Study**

This study examined the relationship between policy frameworks and community engagement with rural governance and livelihood improvement through the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF). The findings underscore that while national policies provide strategic direction, weak institutional capacity and limited local participation often undermine their effectiveness. Resilience-building strategies that reflect local realities and strengthen agency are therefore essential. As Mubangizi (2021, 2024) argues, place-based approaches that harness local assets and integrate community voices are more likely to produce adaptive and sustainable governance outcomes than top-down models.

The SLF highlights the importance of mobilising human, social, natural, financial, and physical capital to strengthen rural communities. This is consistent with Mubangizi's work, which stresses that institutional resilience is contingent on robust micro-level planning and the meaningful involvement of local actors in governance processes (Mubangizi, 2025; Mubangizi & Nzabona, 2025). Enhancing such participation also requires creating institutional mechanisms that balance centralised frameworks with community-driven initiatives and reinforce the agency of rural populations in shaping their development pathways (Mubangizi, 2010, 2025).

Therefore, the implications of this study align with current scholarship: building sustainable and resilient livelihoods necessitates institutional reforms that strengthen the capacity of local government, formalise participatory governance, and foster collaboration between communities, NGOs, researchers, and policymakers. As recent research emphasises (Mubangizi, 2025; Mubangizi & Nzabona, 2025), embedding disaster preparedness and adaptive governance into local planning is particularly urgent in light of climate change and health shocks. More equitable, resilient, and sustainable development trajectories can be achieved by centring rural communities in decision-making and leveraging networks across governance levels.

## Declarations

### Acknowledgements

This paper emanates from research funded by the National Research Foundation.

### Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

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