

# Evidence of Factors Hindering Establishment of Viable Rural Development Action in Eastern Cape Municipalities

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## Abstract

Efforts aimed at assuaging rural areas in South Africa date back to the post-transition-to-democracy era in 1994. During this era, reforms and policy interventions aimed to enhance rural development, with a focus on economic growth within rural landscapes. The main argument in this article is that implementing viable rural development action requires a collaborative effort to address complex aspects of societal and economic transformation. The article draws from a study that examined factors hindering the successful establishment of viable rural development actions in the O.R. Tambo and Amahlathi District municipalities. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with 19 participants, including local economic development officers, entrepreneurs, NGOs, and councillors. The data were analysed using Atlas ti 9 software. The findings highlight several limitations in addressing local development actions, including malfunctioning leadership, climate change, criminal activity, limited access to reliable markets, and funding and skills deficits. To drive change, collaborative action platforms should be established to facilitate the sharing of traditional and innovative knowledge among rural communities and other non-state agents. Leveraging this knowledge and skills can lead to the adoption of best practices and new technologies. The article contributes to a body of knowledge that informs rural development policies and explores alternative ways of achieving development goals such as the infusion of best practices from exclusive top-down approaches to bottom-up approaches.

**Keywords:** Viable rural development action, Economic growth, Bottom-up approach



## Introduction

There has been a global shift from top-down planning procedures to participatory bottom-up community-driven strategies (Gargano, 2021). By focusing on digital inclusion, establishing local knowledge hubs, employing tailored communication strategies, forming partnerships with local organisations, implementing education and literacy programmes, and establishing feeding back mechanisms, the gap in information access for marginalised communities can be reduced. These approaches can enhance their empowerment and social inclusion (Harriss, 2023). Several studies conducted in Europe have highlighted the effectiveness of the bottom-up approach in vitality policy (Hoffmann, & Hoffmann, 2018; Makkonen, & Inkinen, 2023). This policy asserts that local people are best positioned to drive the development of their own regions. This bottom-up approach means that the local community and local players can help define a development pathway for their area consistent with their needs, expectations and plans. Doing this through a collective approach with delegated decision-making enables them to take charge of their own area's future. This alternative model has successfully promoted rural development in European countries facing challenges of rural underdevelopment. It identifies the participation of all local actors (community-led rural development) as crucial for generating and sustaining economic development in rural regions (Makkonen, & Inkinen, 2023).

The concept of vitality policy, prominent in countries like Finland, France, Ireland Norway, Germany and Korea emphasises the promotion of people's participation in rural development through local rural socio-economic formations. This approach challenges municipalities to develop strategies that leverage unique regional resources, involve local organisations and citizens, and integrate various policy sectors into rural development initiatives. This approach promotes holistic and sustainable rural development by leveraging unique regional resources. (Makkonen & Kahila, 2021). It also challenges the municipalities to build their strategies on regional resources and involve other local organisations, community members and integrate different policy sectors in their development initiatives (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020). The vitality policy is envisioned to create synergies and trigger a virtuous rural development cycle that aims at improving the coordination of rural development policies in general (Makkonen, & Kahila, 2021). For instance, in the Netherlands, the construct of rural vitality has been instrumental in integrating rural areas into urban spheres by promoting sustainable agriculture and economic activities within existing infrastructures (Makkonen, & Kahila, 2021).

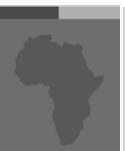
In South Africa, the implementation of a bottom-up development model, like the vitality policy, has not received official recognition from the government for the rural areas. Instead, the country has established legislative frameworks such as the Co-operatives Act, No. 14 of 2005, and its amendment, the Co-operatives Amendment Act, No. 6 of 2013, which regulate and support co-operatives. These acts provide a comprehensive legal framework for the registration, operation, and management of co-operatives, ensuring they function democratically and transparently. They also aim to promote the



development of co-operatives by offering various forms of support and facilitating access to resources.

In contrast, vitality policies for rural development, which may not always be encapsulated within such formal legal structures, rely more on community involvement, local resource utilisation, and the integration of various policy sectors. While they do not always have the formal recognition and regulation that co-operatives enjoy, they aim to achieve holistic and sustainable rural development through a more flexible and inclusive approach (Mihai, Ulman, & David, 2019), (Makkonen & Kahila, 2021). The act, for example, articulates that co-operatives are better because the business model puts people at the heart of economic decision-making and brings a greater sense of fair play to the global economy (Co-operative Amendment Act, No. 6 of 2013). The Co-operative Incentive scheme (CIS) is a grant scheme that supports historically disadvantaged communities and groups in addressing issues of lack of capital and lack of access to finance. Principally co-operatives are a tool to curb poverty, increase income generation and bridge the country's economic gap. Even though there is a small difference, such development actions on the other hand are a highly consortium venture with a bottom-up approach. The vitality policy perspective, as emphasised by Gargano (2021), strongly advocates for local solutions to local problems through a participative approach. This approach focuses on creating and implementing local development strategies through collaboration between public and private partners.

The establishment of viable rural development action rests on the assumption that rural development policy and programmes can only be effective and produce the desired results if all actors at the local level are actively involved in the development process. This includes identifying the challenges faced by the rural economy, proposing potential solutions, and initiating, implementing, monitoring and evaluating the agreed strategy for rural development. Thus, the local people residing in a given community are regarded as having the expertise or knowledge on how their area can be developed (Olar & Jitea, 2021). The core values of vitality in this context are transparent decision-making processes, and the participation and co-operation of key stakeholders in all stages of developing and implementing strategies aimed at addressing the rural development challenges. Key stakeholders include residents, various social and economic formations such as women's groups, farmers association, youth organisations (Makkonen & Inkinen, 2023), Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) operating within the area, government officials, institutions of higher learning and private institutions and local business owners. Representatives from all these entities are regarded as the local actors that should participate in decision-making regarding development priorities and strategies to address identified needs (Olar & Jitea, 2021). Existing literature posits that development and rural development evolve through phases (Lin, Shui, Li, Huang, Wu, Sun, and Liang, 2021). Approaches and efforts aimed at improving the economy, quality of health, environment, infrastructure and housing have been a focus of advanced countries (Sisto, Lopolito, and Van Vliet 2018). Various actors attempt to design rural development plans for their areas



that correspond with their aims. However, mismatches sometimes occur between measures and rural development goals and priorities in practice.

This paper seeks to advance knowledge on approaches used to create an educational environment that empowers rural populations to become change agents through their own knowledge and the integration of local and indigenous solution. Rural development restructuring or economic planning should adopt participatory approaches that embrace the perspectives and methodologies of the local people. Participation approaches have existed in most planning processes albeit in a top-down fashion. The move to bottom approaches has received positive traction due to greater involvement of different sectors, aiming to achieve a more socially inclusive rural development (Hoffmann & Hoffmann, 2018). For Bakre, (2022), the conventional top-down approach to rural development is often rendered unsustainable. For instance, in South Africa in recent years, there has been a gradual emergence of bottom-up practices and various forms of social innovation where diverse stakeholders and role players collaborate.

While the South African government has made strides in improving local development, there is a need to build human capabilities for inclusive and meaningful local development action in rural areas. The country has positioned the National Development Plan Vision 2030 as a key thrust, wherein building human capabilities for local development action has been one of its goals. In South Africa, rural development is a key element supported by legislation and policies such as the Transformation of Certain Rural Act 1998 (Act 94 of 1998); the Physical Planning Act, 1991 (Act 125 of 1991) and the Cooperative Amendment Act, 2013 (Act 6 of 2013). Strategies such the Comprehensive Rural Development Programme (CRDP), Rural Enterprise Infrastructure Development (REID) and the National Rural Youth Service Corps (NARYSEC) aim to build sustainable rural livelihoods, which is aligned with Chapter 6 of the National Development Plan (NDP). These interventions mitigate the factors that lead to poverty and inequality, contributing to the development of the economy. These strategies ensure an effective and sustainable approach for optimal service delivery to rural communities (Bakre, 2022).

Although there are distinct and existing policies and strategies for rural development, South Africa, particularly the Eastern Cape (EC) province continues to face multifaceted and interconnected development challenges due to the legacy of apartheid, which has left serious inherited structural deficiencies. At the core of this uneven underdevelopment are poverty and deprivation in rural areas, especially in the former homelands, which bear the brunt of structural struggles. Such challenges require combined efforts of intersectoral capabilities as well as community involvement. The barriers to rural development are diverse, with limited opportunities for attracting employment to disadvantaged areas and a high brain drain due to educated individuals migrating to towns (Mihai, Ulman, & David, 2019).



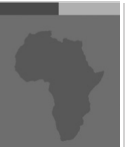
Moreover, the uniqueness of each rural area should be considered, as some rural areas respond positively to economic growth initiatives (*ibid*). The diversity and challenges are linked to economic factors, and rural change is steeped in complexity and variation. Therefore, intervention strategies must be tailored to local experience (*ibid*). This article examines the factors that hinder the establishment of viable rural development action in four local municipalities of the Eastern Cape (EC) Province. Insights gained in the study should translate into creating an educational environment that empowers rural populations to be change agents through their own knowledge and infusion of local and indigenous solutions.

Despite the limited traction of the vitality policy in South Africa's local economic development discourse, it has significant potential. By adopting a vitality policy framework and regulating it through targeted policies and legislation, South Africa can enhance its local economic development efforts, particularly in rural and underdeveloped areas. This approach as a contribution to enhance rural development can lead to more inclusive, sustainable, and resilient communities.

The paper aimed to investigate whether establishing collaborative action platforms for sharing traditional and innovative knowledge among rural communities and other non-state agents can drive change by leveraging their knowledge and skills, thereby adapting best practices and new technologies. There is a need to establish such a knowledge base from the ground up. The implication is the creation of a body of knowledge for transformation, providing insights into rural development policy, drawing lessons to transmission from top-down approaches to inclusive bottom-up approaches, and exploring alternative ways of achieving rural development. The article is divided into five sections. It starts with an introduction and overview of literature citing relevant and exclusive top down approaches to bottom up approaches and for alternative ways of doing things. The third section covers South African current rural development policy and theory. The fourth and fifth section covers the research methods and findings and discussions respectively

## **South African Current Rural Development Policy and Theory**

The model of a viable system is defined as a framework for rural development action. It considers factors like resource availability, stakeholder support, and logistical challenges to ensure effective execution. The model involves strategies and initiatives that address the unique challenges of rural areas, promoting sustainable economic growth, improving quality of life, and preserving the environment. It integrates and shares various types of knowledge necessary for decision making. The key components of viable rural development action include economic diversification, infrastructure development, education and skills development, environment sustainability, community participation and governance and financial inclusion (Casini, Boncinelli, Gerini, Romano, Scozzafava, and Contini, 2021). This sectoral approach to rural development has been successfully experimented with in various contexts including the LEADER programme in the European Union through local action groups; the Mahtama Gandhi National Employment Guarantee



Act in India to promote economic security and rural infrastructure development, and the Community Driven Development programmes in Brazil and the Philippines to empower local communities supported by national government and international organisation.

In the South African context, the importance of local activities is highlighted through the local economic development (LED). Ideally, LED is a form of process where local people from all sectors work together to stimulate local activity to collectively create better conditions for economic growth and employment generation (Nel, 2019). This involves joint planning by the municipality, its communities and the business sector. As articulated in the White Paper on Local Government (1998), LED is a concept of developmental local government aimed at encapsulating a core principle of community development and rural development. This approach emphasises collaboration, sustainability and holistic improvement of community well-being (Nel 2019).

There are similarities and differences in the way local economic development and viable rural development action are conceptualised, but both emphasise promoting local development by identifying challenges faced by rural communities. One key difference is that LED often appears grassroots-driven on paper but typically operates at the local government level rather than within specific communities. As a result, the notion of locality does not take precedence in LED, leading to incomplete and ineffective growth promotion in local communities (Nel, 2019). In viable development action organisations, the local actor is given priority over the state, whereas in other models, the organisational framework and its founding principles take precedence and shape the implementation (*ibid*).

The question is: To what extent has the current rural development policy taken local development action into account? In the new political dispensation, the majority of the key rural development policies and programmes can be regarded as a product of central planning; they are crafted and implemented by the State. The NDP (2011), the Eastern Cape Provincial Development Plan and the Comprehensive Rural Development Programme are predominantly government driven. However, these key policies do emphasise the participation of all actors in the development process as critical for achieving sustainable rural development.

In South Africa, two policy frameworks that closely promote local development action or mimic its principles are the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) and cooperatives. Both frameworks emphasise community involvement, sustainable development, and holistic improvement of local areas. The process of developing the IDP is open to all actors and invites participation of diverse stakeholders. The implementation of IDP is solely driven by the local sphere of government and responds directly to the local needs and utilises the local resources (Dlamini, and Reddy, 2018). An IDP is a legal instrument that details an overall framework for development, addressing both the financial plans and developmental needs of the individuals and communities (Molale, 2019; Dlamini, & Reddy



2018). According to the Municipal Systems Act (Act 32 of 2000), all municipalities should develop such a management tool to improve the quality of life for their residents. (*ibid*). Apart from this, viable rural development action differs notably from the IDP framework.

The upsurge of newly established cooperatives in rural South Africa since the advent of the new political dispensation in 1994 represents a significant development in the country's efforts to promote local economic development and social inclusion. This period marked a shift towards democratic governance and a concerted effort to address the economic disparities inherited from apartheid (Okem, 2023). The government has actively promoted cooperative registration as a means to alleviate poverty and support economic growth in rural areas (Andrew, 2023; Department of Trade and Industry, 2010). Cooperatives were introduced as a response to continued unemployment and lack of employment opportunities, aimed at improving livelihoods (Andrew, 2023). However, studies by Okem (2023) and Andrew (2023) indicate that cooperatives in South Africa often struggle with sustainability of operations, issues in leadership and management, and inadequate access to markets. They attribute these challenges to the absence of a dedicated agency to support cooperatives comprehensively, informalisation of cooperative entities by self-help groups, and limited accessibility of critical business infrastructure necessary for cooperative operations (Andrew, 2023; Okem, 2023).

This article is grounded on assemblage theory which examines how heterogeneous elements —such as discourses, institutions, laws, administrative measures, scientific knowledge, moral prescriptions, and material interests—are assembled to constitute a technical field fit for governing and improvement (Willett, 2021). Secondly, it explores how these entities are constructed through historical processes. The theory emphasises multiscale social realities produced by recurring processes within populations. This resonates with the study's focus on the various stakeholders constituting a community, emphasising contracts at different levels of government and society.

The theory views rural spaces as both local and relatively permanent, arguing that uneven development in capitalist societies is structured through class relations spatially organised by the relations of production (*ibid*). This involves the economic dynamics of ownership of means of production, influencing power relations and dominance. The conceptualisation of space, according to the theory, shapes rural realities through spatial practices influenced by capitalism and everyday rural life, which are fragmented and inconsistent.

Thus, this article argues that assemblage theory offers a robust framework for analysing the social complexity of realities, proposing a bottom-up approach that derives validity from its multifaceted functionalities. It contributes to knowledge by developing new insights into the mechanisms operating at various spatial scales, illustrating how individuals interact within broader populations. For instance, it elucidates the hierarchical governance structures at national, provincial, and local levels, which influence the decisions made by officials in government agencies across different jurisdictions (See



Mubangizi, 2021; Mubangizi, 2023). The research question underlying this study explores the core challenges of rural development, particularly pronounced in provinces containing former homelands like the Eastern Cape (EC).

## Description of the Study Area

The study was conducted in two specific regions within the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa: O.R. Tambo District Municipality (ORTDM) and Amathole District Municipality (ADM), focusing on selected local municipalities within each district (See Figure 1). ORTDM, situated along the eastern coast, covers an area of 16,946.84 square kilometers and comprises five local municipalities: King Sabatha Dalindyebo, Nyandeni, Port St Johns, Mhlontlo, and Ngquza Hill. It is predominantly rural, with a population of approximately 1,760,389 people, of whom 1,183,635 are estimated to be living in poverty (Morgan, 2017). About 9.3% of the population live in urban areas.

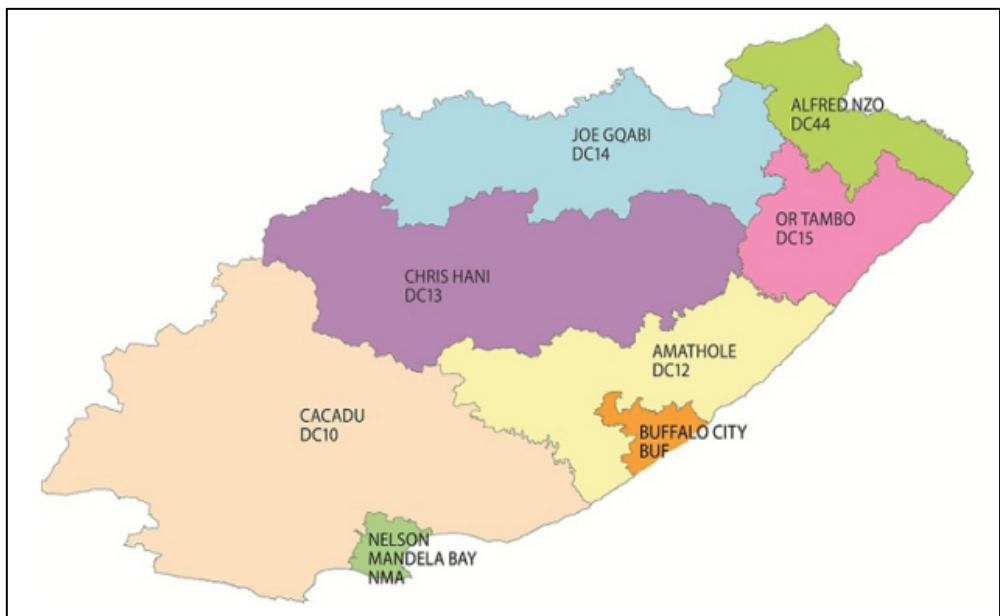


Figure 1: Eastern Cape Province District Municipalities (LGH Eastern Cape, 2013)

## Design, Population and Sampling

This study employed a qualitative approach to investigate the barriers to establishing effective rural development strategies that promote local economic growth. In-depth interviews were conducted to capture the nuanced meanings, perceptions, and attitudes of participants towards viable rural development actions. The sample comprised 19 participants who were purposively selected for their extensive knowledge of local policies





and enterprises (Andrade, 2021). Purposive sampling was chosen to ensure participants held diverse and relevant perspectives on the study's focal issues (Campbell et al., 2020).

Participants included four local economic development officers, five farmers, four entrepreneurs, two representatives from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and four councillors. This selection aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors hindering viable rural development actions. The qualitative nature of the study allowed for a deep exploration of participant experiences, crucial for uncovering insights into rural development challenges (Campbell et al., 2020).

### **Data Collection**

In-depth interviews served as the primary method to investigate the hindrances to establishing viable rural development actions. Face-to-face interviews were chosen to facilitate detailed exploration and clarification of issues, yielding rich qualitative data. Interviews were conducted in IsiXhosa, and consent was obtained for recording using a voice recorder. Subsequently, the interviews were transcribed and translated into English to facilitate analysis and interpretation. This approach ensured that the nuances of participants' responses were accurately captured and analysed (Decuypere, 2020).

### **Data Analysis**

The Thematic Network Analysis (TNA) was applied in analysing the qualitative data. TNA is increasingly recognised in social sciences for its ability to explore complex relationships within data, offering flexibility and descriptive power (Decuypere, 2020). This approach involves identifying and summarising main themes from raw data into interconnected networks, providing a structured representation of thematic relationships (Decuypere, 2020). TNA facilitated the visualisation and interpretation of qualitative data through network diagrams, enhancing understanding and identifying gaps in the data. Atlas.ti 8 software was utilised as a platform to manage and analyse the qualitative data effectively. This methodological approach ensured a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the data, aligning with the study's aim to uncover factors hindering viable rural development actions.

### **Factors Hindering Viable Rural Development Action**

Findings indicate the challenges impeding effective rural development initiatives in King Sabatha Dalindyebo (KSD), Port St Johns (PSJ), Mbhashe, and Mnquma Local Municipalities. Figure 1 illustrates these barriers through a network diagram, revealing issues such as inadequate resources, limited funding opportunities, criminal activities, and unreliable markets. Additionally, specific challenges unique to KSD and PSJ include governance issues, climate change impacts, natural disasters, interpersonal conflicts, and skills shortages. These findings are organised into thematic categories derived from the data, detailed and analysed in the following sections.



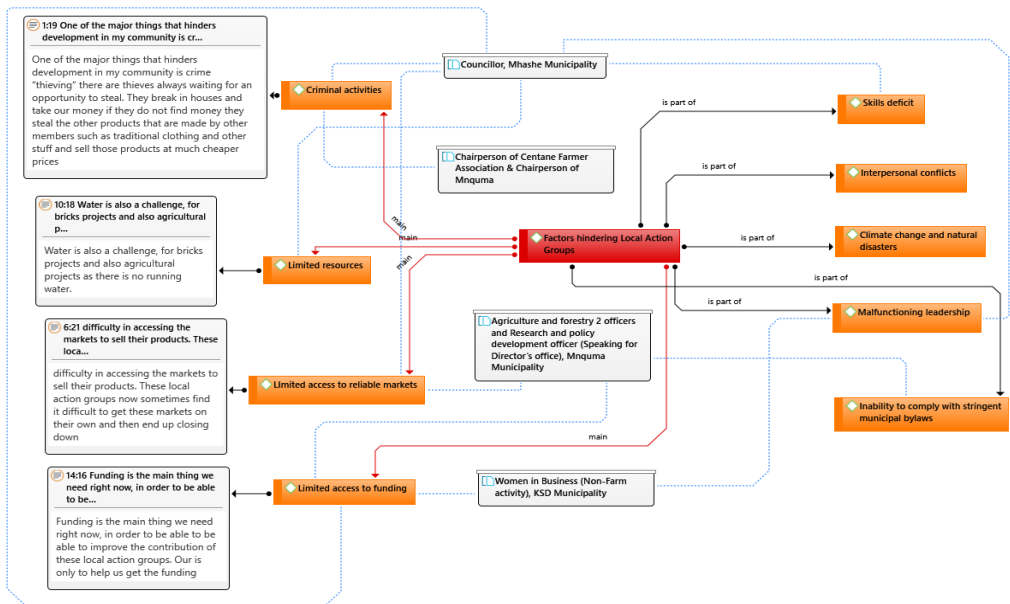


Figure 2: Factors Hindering Viable Rural Development Action

## Limited Resources

All participants across the four local municipalities highlighted the lack of resources as a significant barrier to initiating and sustaining viable rural development efforts. Specifically, they expressed a need for agricultural inputs, farming machinery like tractors and harvesters, irrigation systems, fencing, storage facilities, and water reservoirs. Fishers required modern fishing equipment, while those involved in manufacturing lacked construction machinery. The ongoing limited access to these resources continues to adversely affect local economic activities. Effective rural development strategies should empower communities to leverage indigenous resources available in their areas. These endogenous resources, locally exploited, can stimulate local business and economic activity, thereby supporting the local market and benefiting the community. The presence of any resource within a geographical area should inspire innovative approaches on the periphery, aligning with Tirado & Hernández's (2019) assertion that innovation enhances the value of endogenous resources.

For viable rural development action to effectively fulfil their developmental role, three essential conditions must be met: access to resources, access to knowledge and skills, and effective leadership and decision-making processes (Bakre, 2022). In rural areas, particularly, the means of production must stimulate economic growth while utilising locally available natural assets to their fullest potential, as highlighted in studies by Dapira (2024) and Zhan & Walker (2019). However, local communities often lack the necessary technical and entrepreneurial skills to fully exploit these resources, which is crucial for their sustainable development (Guzal-Dec & Zwolińska-Ligaj, 2017; Chmieliński, Faccilongo, Fiore, & La Sala, 2018).



### **Limited Access to Funding**

All the participants, particularly those who own enterprises, highlighted limited funding as a significant barrier to establishing and developing viable rural development action in the four study areas. Startup capital is crucial for business establishment and sustainability, yet many enterprises are owned by individuals who lack other employment or access to public and private funding schemes. The challenge of accessing financial information and developing fundable proposals further complicates securing adequate funding. Despite government initiatives such as the Small Enterprise Development Agency, Umsobomvu, National Youth Service, and Black Business Supplier Development Programme, there is a general lack of awareness about these funding opportunities among potential beneficiaries. This hampers the establishment of sustainable rural development actions, relegating many initiatives to survivalist modes of operation (Olar & Jitea, 2021).

### **Criminal Activities**

The progress towards establishing viable rural development action has been significantly hindered by criminal activities in both district municipalities. Participants reported incidents of theft targeting farm produce, including crops and animals, as well as theft of infrastructure like fences. Similar criminal activities were noted among enterprises involved in artwork, catering, manufacturing, and financial services, resulting in substantial losses and sometimes closure of businesses. According to the South African Community Epidemiology Network on Drug Use (Dada, 2022), statistics indicate high usage of substances like cannabis and methamphetamine among young adults under 20 in the Eastern Cape, though specific rural-urban breakdowns were not provided. Participants attributed much of the criminal behaviour to local teenagers and young adults influenced by drug use, compounded by challenges in law enforcement due to distant police stations from the communities surveyed. Despite limited research specifically on rural adolescent criminal activities in South Africa, these incidents appear to be on the rise.

### **Limited Access to Reliable Markets**

Limitations in terms of reliable markets were also a major barrier curtailing the establishment of viable rural development action in both district municipalities. Viable rural development action relies heavily on selling locally produced goods, which necessitates access to reliable markets. However, the study areas had limited local and external markets for their products, leading many to sell at low prices or cease operations. Nel (2019) notes that rural producers face significant competition from urban entrepreneurs who benefit from established markets, better infrastructure, and a capital-oriented economy.

### **Skills Deficit**

It was also noted with concern that some factors hindering the establishment of viable rural development action include members who lack knowledge about the core business of their groups. For instance, some individuals join these groups for financial gains but lack the technical know-how to execute their assigned duties effectively. This stems from



limited training and capacitation on how to properly start up and manage a group, an issue requiring urgent attention in most areas. The most needed training relates to agriculture and artisanship. For instance, a study conducted in Poland on establishing viable rural development action revealed that 60% of respondents stressed the need to organise courses or training aimed at developing local entrepreneurship (Guzal-Dec & Zwolińska-Ligaj, 2017). Skills deficits remain a challenge, as a recent study confirmed that more capacity and skills building is necessary to upscale all forms of entrepreneurs, thereby boosting both the quality and quantity of their products (Bakre, 2022).

### **Climate Change and Natural Disasters**

Climatic variations in recent years have also impacted some of the projects owned by communities. Agricultural entities, for instance, have recently been exposed to unpredictable floods, resulting in the loss of crops and animals, such as poultry, in low-lying areas. Some communities are also experiencing drought and water shortages due to climate change, limiting both animal and crop production among some entities. In some instances, climate change affects the production processes of rural people who frequently rely on natural resources. The study's results concur with the findings of Bakre (2022), who noted that current rural development initiatives do not match the pace of resource depletion attributed to climate change. Therefore, proactive measures such as investments and the implementation of national drought policies are crucial for addressing such calamities. Additionally, the Climate Council of Australia (2022) highlights that rural poverty in Australia is exacerbated by climate change, posing a threat to food security, health, and the environment in rural communities. Similarly, in the South African rural context, climate change continues to be a constant feature, requiring collaborative efforts to navigate and address the intricate aspects involved in societal and political transformation.

### **Malfunctioning Leadership**

Besides the main barriers mentioned above, the majority of respondents blamed the failure to establish viable rural development actions on malfunctioning leadership. They claimed that some political leaders were obstructing potential government support from reaching the intended recipients due to corruption and a lack of understanding of grassroots realities. Respondents indicated that many politicians were detached from community realities and ongoing projects, making them ineffective advocates for the necessary support. In some cases, political leaders imposed projects on communities, leading to community rejection and eventual project failure. This view was particularly echoed in ORTDM. Locally driven initiatives require an authority-based application, wherein community stakeholders collectively decide on development options for their locality (Nel, 2019).

### **Interpersonal Conflicts**

The results reveal that interpersonal conflicts act as a barrier to the success of viable rural development actions. Given that these actions inherently rely on teamwork and unity,



conflicts among team members can be particularly detrimental. Common grounds for disputes include differing views, profit-sharing disagreements, and task execution within projects. The lack of a common understanding, compromise, or conflict resolution mechanisms often leads to group disintegration and the eventual collapse of these initiatives. As noted by Folger, Poole, and Stutman (2021), arenas for conflict in interpersonal relationships encompass emotional and irrational impulses, and conflicts are often characterised by face-to-face exchanges within small groups. In such conflicts, individuals and groups can negotiate or bargain for a common outcome (ibid).

### **Opportunities for Viable Development**

The primary opportunity identified across all four local municipalities is the abundance of natural resources, such as minerals, fish, land, water, and forestry. These resources remain largely unutilised due to a lack of capital. With adequate funding, these resources could drive the establishment and success of viable rural development actions. Additionally, human capital, particularly the large number of unemployed youth and adults, presents a significant opportunity. Harnessing their energy and potential could further support the development of these initiatives. As noted by Nel (2019) and Gargano (2021), effective local development actions should meet basic needs, empower communities, enhance community responsibility, and leverage local resources.

One participant in O.R. Tambo District Municipality highlighted the existence of funding opportunities for establishing viable rural development actions through public-private partnerships involving businesses, unions, regional governments, and community-based organisations (Nel, 2019). However, challenges such as lack of collateral security, inadequate proposal writing skills, and corruption hinder local communities from accessing these opportunities and securing meaningful finances for their projects. Another participant in Mnquma Municipality noted the presence of police forums aimed at curbing local crimes, although these forums are not adequately equipped to fulfil their duties. Future research is advisable to provide better insights into the prospects and challenges of viable rural development actions within the South African context, particularly in the Eastern Cape

### **Conclusion**

It is evident from the in-depth interviews that the majority of participants cited a lack of resources as a significant barrier to their economic emancipation. Additionally, the results illustrated other major factors limiting the development of viable rural development actions: limited access to funding, criminal activities, limited access to reliable markets, skills deficit, climate change, malfunctioning leadership, interpersonal conflicts, and inability to comply. Participants recognised that participation in economic activities to raise their productivity towards market-oriented surplus production is crucial. Tirado and Hernández (2019) echoed the same sentiments, asserting that viable rural development



action, as an empowerment tool, plays a direct role in enabling rural communities to drive their own development initiatives and processes.

The official recognition of local talent engaging in entrepreneurial activity, regulated by policy and an agreement between the state and the people, would facilitate better organisation for capacitation, resourcing, and monitoring. It is evident that the successful implementation of such an underdeveloped policy measure requires more attention in the South African context. This article highlights the importance of combined efforts between the state and its citizens, indicating that valuable lessons are still to be learned. Although local enterprises may resemble co-operatives, they are distinct; however, these activities can be organised into priority themes such as agriculture, trade, and economic resources. Adapting these initiatives to the South African local context, conditions, and development culture would be a crucial step. Increasing the involvement of local rural actors in rural development policies should enable a more inclusive, bottom-up development approach.

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