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## Institutional Resilience And Sustainable Livelihoods in Rural South Africa's Alfred Nzo District Municipality

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# **Institutional resilience and sustainable livelihoods In rural South Africa's Alfred Nzo District Municipality**

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates how rural communities in South Africa's Alfred Nzo District Municipality respond to environmental shocks, pandemics, and other crises, using the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) and institutional theory. With local government as the institution most closely linked to rural citizens, the research examines the role of governance in enabling or constraining community resilience and livelihood sustainability.

A qualitative case study design included 11 in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions with key informants. The findings reveal that geographic isolation, poor infrastructure, and the underutilization of natural resources contribute to the area's persistent socioeconomic marginalization. Local institutions are pivotal in shaping access to critical resources, such as land, water, and markets, especially during crises.

Three key themes emerged: infrastructure deficits, institutional capacity limitations, and erratic livelihood resilience. The study finds that weak and inflexible governance structures significantly exacerbate community vulnerabilities and hinder the ability of subsistence farming communities to adapt to and recover from disruptions.

The research identifies strategic opportunities for growth in agriculture, tourism, and cultural heritage. Unlocking this potential requires targeted infrastructure investment and institutional reforms to improve service delivery and resource accessibility. The study highlights the critical importance of adaptive and inclusive local governance in promoting sustainable livelihoods in vulnerable rural settings.

**Keywords:** sustainable livelihoods framework, institutional theory, institutional capacity, rural resilience

## **Résilience institutionnelle et moyens de subsistance durables dans le district municipal d'Alfred Nzo, en Afrique du Sud**

### **Résumé**

Cette étude examine la manière dont les communautés rurales du district municipal d'Alfred Nzo, en Afrique du Sud, réagissent aux chocs environnementaux, aux pandémies et autres crises, en s'appuyant sur le cadre des moyens de subsistance durables (SLF) et la théorie institutionnelle. Le gouvernement local étant l'institution la plus étroitement liée aux citoyens ruraux, la recherche examine le rôle de la gouvernance pour favoriser ou freiner la résilience communautaire et la durabilité des moyens de subsistance.

Une étude de cas qualitative a été menée, comprenant 11 entretiens approfondis et deux groupes de discussion avec des informateurs clés. Les résultats révèlent que l'isolement géographique, la faiblesse des infrastructures et la sous-utilisation des ressources naturelles contribuent à la marginalisation socio-économique persistante de la région. Les institutions locales jouent un rôle crucial dans l'accès aux ressources essentielles, telles que la terre, l'eau et les marchés, notamment en période de crise.

Trois thèmes clés ont émergé : les déficits d'infrastructures, les limites des capacités institutionnelles et la résilience erratique des moyens de subsistance. L'étude révèle que la faiblesse et la rigidité des structures de gouvernance exacerbent considérablement les vulnérabilités des communautés et entravent la capacité des communautés agricoles de subsistance à s'adapter aux perturbations et à s'en remettre,

La recherche identifie des opportunités stratégiques de croissance dans l'agriculture, le tourisme et le patrimoine culturel. Libérer ce potentiel nécessite des investissements ciblés dans les infrastructures et des réformes institutionnelles pour améliorer la prestation de services et l'accessibilité aux ressources. L'étude souligne l'importance cruciale d'une gouvernance locale adaptative et inclusive pour promouvoir des moyens de subsistance durables dans les zones rurales vulnérables.

**Mots-clés :** cadre des moyens de subsistance durables, théorie institutionnelle, capacité institutionnelle, résilience rurale

## **1.0 Introduction**

### ***1.1 Background: Local Government in Rural South Africa***

Local governments in rural parts of South Africa, especially those governing communal land areas, manage the intersection between traditional land-use practices and the demands of modern governance. Alfred Nzo District Municipality (ANDM), located in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, comprises four local municipalities: Winnie Madikizela Mandela, Matatiele, Umzimvubu, and Ntabankulu Local Municipalities. The district municipality is emblematic of the many challenges rural municipalities face. It must balance the scant revenue from residents living on communal lands against the need to provide essential services to all its citizenry. The inadequate tax base in rural regions has long been a significant challenge, often resulting in insufficient revenue to sustain essential public services (Boogaard & Beach, 2023; Beach & Boogaard, 2023). This can have significant long-term implications, particularly in governance, economic sustainability, and social equity, as the underfunding of public services exacerbates pre-existing inequalities and impedes local development efforts. Many of South Africa's rural municipalities, particularly those in areas that were designated as 'homelands' in the apartheid era, experience severe financial distress, with nearly half unable to deliver fundamental services such as water and electricity consistently (Gibbs et al., 2023). Furthermore, weak revenue streams from residents living on communal lands constrain the capacity of the municipality to invest in and maintain sustainable infrastructure, ultimately contributing to a decline in the quality of public services (Green et al., 2019).

The rural areas of South Africa, particularly those located in the areas designated as 'homelands' in the apartheid era, consistently report high poverty rates, with elevated poverty gap ratios signalling deeper, systemic problems (Sebola & Mamabolo, 2020). Although some improvements in poverty levels were reported across 82% of South Africa's district municipalities between 2008 and 2017, many households remained at the same poverty level, highlighting the persistence of poverty despite marginal progress (Sebola & Mamabolo, 2020).

Economic development in rural municipalities is further constrained by financial limitations related to a lack of job opportunities and a low skills base, which hinder their ability to attract investment and expand their tax base. Local Economic Development (LED) has been identified as a crucial strategy for fostering economic resilience and social harmony in rural communities (Chiloane & Meyer, 2024; Rulashe & Ramolobe, 2024). However, many municipalities lack the resources to implement these initiatives effectively (Zulu & Mubangizi, 2014; Matindike & Mago, 2024). A strategic focus on LED, tailored to the unique characteristics of rural areas, is thus essential to enhance economic opportunities and stabilize rural economies.

Investment in basic and social infrastructure is pivotal in promoting economic growth and social development in rural regions. Research indicates that infrastructure investments generate more substantial benefits in rural contexts than urban ones, underscoring the importance of targeted infrastructure development (Gnade et al., 2016). However, achieving these outcomes requires effective governance and collaboration among various stakeholders to optimize public service delivery and infrastructure development (Maenetja & Kgobe, 2024). Simultaneously, migration from rural to urban areas continues to create pressure in metropolitan areas, often exacerbating urban poverty and straining urban resources (Maenetja & Kgobe, 2024). Thus, the socioeconomic challenges in rural municipalities have broader implications, impacting both rural and urban areas.

The socioeconomic landscape of rural municipalities in South Africa is thus marked by enduring poverty, limited economic opportunities, and significant pressures from rural-urban migration, all of which create challenges that impede development. Understanding and addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach, considering the complex dynamics. The research reported in this paper was conducted as part of a larger study that aimed to address this gap by investigating institutional resilience and sustainable livelihoods in rural South Africa.

## **2.0 Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

To ground the analysis, this section first clarifies the study's core concepts, institutional resilience and sustainable livelihoods, before presenting the theoretical framework. This dual approach ensures conceptual precision and provides a coherent foundation for examining how governance structures influence rural livelihood outcomes.

### ***2.1 Conceptual Clarification of Core Constructs***

Institutional resilience and sustainable livelihoods are two foundational constructs underpinning this study. Their conceptual clarity is critical to understanding how local institutions in South Africa's Alfred Nzo District Municipality mediate the ability of rural communities to cope with and adapt to various shocks and stressors.

Institutional resilience refers to the capacity of formal and informal institutions to absorb disturbances, adapt to changing conditions, and continue to perform essential governance functions (Ostrom, 2005; North, 1990). In the context of rural municipalities, this encompasses the ability of local governments to maintain service delivery, coordinate actors, and facilitate access to livelihood resources under conditions of crisis, such as environmental shocks, pandemics, or chronic infrastructural deficits. Resilience is about persistence and transformation: institutions must withstand pressure and evolve to meet emerging local needs.

As defined by Chambers and Conway (1992) and refined by Scoones (1998), sustainable livelihoods encompass the capabilities, assets, and activities required for a means of living that can cope with and recover from stress, while enhancing capabilities and assets without undermining the natural resource base. A livelihood is considered sustainable when it is resilient in the face of external shocks, provides for present and future well-being, and contributes to economic, environmental, and social sustainability.

The interrelationship between institutional resilience and sustainable livelihoods is central to this study. Resilient institutions can facilitate access to and management of natural, human, financial, social, and physical livelihood assets by ensuring effective governance, inclusive decision-making, and coordinated service delivery. Conversely, institutional fragility undermines these processes, exacerbating vulnerability and limiting adaptive capacity. This conceptual lens allows for a systematic analysis of how governance failures or successes influence community resilience in rural contexts.

### ***2.2 Theoretical Framing: Integrating Institutional Theory and the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework***

To explore the governance-livelihoods nexus, the study draws on two complementary theoretical lenses: Institutional Theory and the SLF.

Institutional theory, articulated by North (1990) and Ostrom (2005), offers insight into how formal rules, informal norms, and governance structures influence access to and control over livelihood resources. Institutions set the 'rules of the game' regulating land tenure, market entry, resource allocation, and service delivery. In rural municipalities like those in Alfred Nzo District, institutional arrangements shape the extent to which residents can access water, land, agricultural support, and infrastructure. Community vulnerability is magnified when these institutions are weak, under-resourced, or inflexible.

The SLF complements institutional theory by focusing on how individuals and households use their asset base to pursue livelihood strategies in the face of vulnerability. It identifies five core asset types: human, natural, physical, financial, and social. It emphasizes the importance of transforming structures (e.g., institutions, policies) and processes (e.g., governance practices, service delivery) that mediate access to these assets. The SLF is particularly useful for analyzing how rural households manage and adapt their livelihood strategies during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or extreme weather events.

By integrating these two frameworks, the study underscores that rural livelihood outcomes cannot be understood in isolation from the institutional environment. For example, land and water resources (natural capital) are insufficient for livelihood sustainability unless institutions governing their use are robust, equitable, and adaptive. Likewise, household capacities and the effectiveness of institutional arrangements and governance structures determine access to markets, credit, and technical support.

This study's frameworks guide the analysis of how Alfred Nzo's local municipalities responded to compounded shocks and structural poverty. Particular attention is paid to how institutional resilience, or its absence, shaped the sustainability of livelihood strategies. This theoretical synthesis also informs the recommendations presented later in the paper, emphasizing infrastructure investment, institutional reform, and inclusive governance as levers for improving rural resilience and development outcomes.

### **3.0 Research Objectives**

This research explored the intricate relationship between rural local government structures and rural livelihoods and sustainability. Specifically, it provided a comprehensive overview of the areas under study, examining how socioeconomic, geographical, and institutional factors distinguish rural municipalities within South Africa's local government framework. By contextualizing the rural environment, the research sought to identify how these municipalities operate within broader governance structures and how their distinct characteristics affect development outcomes.

Additionally, the study investigated the role of local governments in providing essential services such as water, sanitation, electricity, and education, as well as how rural communities accessed these services. Understanding these provisions is vital for assessing the effectiveness of local government institutions in supporting sustainable livelihoods. Furthermore, the research examined prevalent livelihood strategies within these areas, such as small-scale farming, informal trading, and access to social grants, while exploring how local governments supported or hindered these strategies through policy, infrastructure, and governance practices.

Finally, this research explored the key challenges and opportunities for advancing rural development within the local government framework. By identifying institutional weaknesses, such as limited capacity, governance gaps,

and resource shortages, alongside emerging prospects like network governance models and policy reforms, the study offers insights into how rural local governments can better contribute to sustainable development and improved livelihood outcomes.

#### **4.0 Research Methodology**

Data collection involved eleven one-on-one interviews with key informants and two focus group discussions (with eight and ten participants) conducted in two of the four local municipalities of the district. The participants were selected based on their expertise and involvement in local governance, rural development, and service provision. They included local government officials, community leaders, and representatives from non-governmental organizations. Such purposive sampling is frequently used in qualitative research to ensure that participants with relevant knowledge and experience are included (Patton, 2015).

Focus group participants from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds were selected. They included residents and stakeholders actively involved in rural livelihood activities to capture various community perspectives. These discussions allowed for in-depth dialogue about the lived experiences of rural community members and the challenges they face accessing services and engaging in livelihood strategies.

The study employed thematic analysis to interpret data from interviews and focus groups, enabling the identification of patterns related to local government roles, service provision, and rural development strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The use of Nvivo software facilitated the systematic coding, organization, and management of qualitative data, enhancing the rigour and transparency of the analysis (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). This approach provided nuanced insights into local governance and its implications for rural livelihoods and sustainability.

The data analysis process yielded five major themes aligned with the study objectives: (1) geographic and economic features of rurality, (2) economic dependence on grants and informal livelihoods, (3) infrastructure deficits and access to services, (4) environmental challenges and resource underutilization, and (5) cultural practices and diversity. These themes provided a framework for presenting the findings and reflect the intersections between institutional arrangements and rural livelihood strategies. The subsequent section details these themes, with triangulated data drawn from interviews and FGDs.

#### **5.0 Findings**

The research is anchored in a thematic analysis that draws on participant interviews and focus group discussions, offering insights into key themes related to rurality in the Alfred Nzo District. The findings of this study are presented thematically, reflecting the intersection of institutional dynamics and livelihood sustainability in ANDM. The thematic areas were developed through inductive coding and aligned with the research objectives in Section 3. These include: (1) the geographic and economic context of rural underdevelopment, (2) the nature and limitations of livelihood strategies, (3) the state of physical and digital infrastructure, (4) the management of natural resources and exposure to environmental risks, and (5) the role of cultural practices in shaping resilience and development. Each theme is substantiated with insights from 11 key informant interviews and two focus group discussions, ensuring triangulation of perspectives and greater interpretive depth.

### ***5.1 Geographic and Economic Features of the Rural Context***

The data highlighted the geographic isolation and economic challenges prevalent in the ANDM, pointing out how the district's rural landscape, limited size, and scarcity of formal employment opportunities contribute to its socioeconomic difficulties. Participants described Alfred Nzo as one of the smallest and poorest districts in South Africa, characterized by its rurality and socioeconomic profile. The district's geographic diversity, encompassing coastal and mountainous regions, presents opportunities and economic development constraints. Despite its untapped potential for agriculture and tourism, the district faces significant obstacles to growth due to its underdeveloped infrastructure and limited economic base.

Participant 1 underscored the district's rural nature, describing it as “the smallest and poorest” (personal communication, May 20, 2024) in the province of the Eastern Cape. In contrast, Participant 5 emphasized the geographical diversity of the area, noting the Wild Coast in Winnie Madikizela Mandela Local Municipality and the “belt of mountains” (personal communication, May 20, 2024) in Matatiele Local Municipality as key features. This reflects the broader discourse on rural underdevelopment, where geographic isolation often translates into limited economic diversification and market access (Todaro & Smith, 2015). Despite the district's rich natural resources, particularly in terms of its potential for agriculture and tourism, the lack of infrastructure and investment perpetuates the underutilization of these sectors, reflecting what Moseley (2003) identifies as rural economic stagnation.

### ***5.2 Economic Dependence on Grants and Informal Livelihoods***

In ANDM, the local economy remains heavily dependent on government transfers due to its limited internal capacity to generate revenue, a typical pattern in rural municipalities globally (Bateman, 2010). This was a consistent concern among interviewees, who emphasized how the area's rural nature constrains its ability to raise revenue. As Participant 1 (personal communication, May 20, 2024) noted, municipalities “rely heavily on grants” because they cannot “collect revenue” locally, a view echoed by Participant 6 (personal communication, May 24, 2024), who added that “financial resources are primarily dependent on grants.” Participant 9 (personal communication, May 24, 2024) elaborated that this dependence restricts municipal planning flexibility and results in reactive rather than strategic development.

Focus group participants also stressed that this grant-dependence reinforces household-level precarity. One participant from the Matatiele group observed that “for most people, there is no income except the child grant and a bit of maize from the garden” (personal communication, September 22, 2025). Another from Umzimvubu pointed to the role of the Expanded Public Works Programme, noting that “the only real income comes when there is a road project, and that is not every year” (personal communication, May 3, 2024).

Subsistence agriculture, while widespread, is not economically viable for most households. Participants 1, 3, and 5 described how farming is mainly for household consumption, with minimal surplus for market sale (personal communication, May 20, 2024). This aligns with Ellis's (2000) characterization of rural economies as ‘incomplete markets’ with constrained diversification. Participant 5 observed that the absence of formal employment compels youth to migrate or engage in informal retailing: “Our young people leave. Those who stay, sell in small spaza shops or wait for municipal contracts” (personal communication, May 20, 2024).

This economic fragility leaves households and the municipality vulnerable to external shocks, such as reductions in social transfers or climate-related disruptions, thereby deepening cycles of poverty and economic stagnation. Triangulated perspectives from key informants and community participants underscore the urgent need for structural interventions to build productive capacity in agriculture and enterprise development.

The region's reliance on grants and informal economic activities underscores the need for structural interventions, such as targeted investments in infrastructure, agriculture, and tourism, to unlock its potential and foster sustainable rural livelihoods. Without such investments, the district may remain trapped in a cycle of dependency, where external support is necessary to maintain basic levels of economic functionality but is insufficient to catalyze transformative growth (Scoones, 2009).

### ***5.3 Infrastructure Deficits and Access to Services in Rural Areas***

The challenges related to infrastructure in rural regions such as the ANDM are substantial and multifaceted. The data highlights how inadequacies in physical infrastructure, coupled with limited access to essential services like water, roads, and communication networks, contribute significantly to the socioeconomic marginalization of these communities. Rural infrastructure deficits are not isolated; they reflect a broader pattern seen in developing areas globally, where underdeveloped infrastructure is both a symptom and a cause of persistent poverty (Fishbein, 2001).

*5.3.1 Lack of essential infrastructure.* Participants pointed to the severe lack of essential infrastructure as a significant impediment to daily life and long-term development in the ANDM. Participant 3 (personal communication, May 20, 2025) noted that only a small proportion of the population could afford necessities, including telecommunication and transport fare to access hospital services. At the same time, the vast majority remained underserved in terms of water and sanitation infrastructure due to limited resources. This aligns with Moser's (1998) findings that infrastructure deficits exacerbate poverty and limit opportunities for economic mobility in low-income communities. A focus group participant noted that recurring flooding in the region damages the fragile infrastructure, particularly low-lying bridges and gravel roads. These conditions render the district especially vulnerable to natural disasters, confirming the findings of Pelling (2003), who argues that inadequate infrastructure in rural areas increases vulnerability to environmental risks, perpetuating cycles of marginalization.

Participant 6 (personal communication, May 24, 2024) noted that the Ntabankulu Local Municipality was acutely affected by water scarcity, inadequate telecommunications, and a lack of social amenities such as community halls and sports facilities. These deficiencies reflect what Porter et al. (2012) identify as the 'infrastructure gap' between rural and urban areas, where rural communities are systematically deprived of the investments needed for socioeconomic development. Participant 7 (personal communication, May 24, 2024) drew attention to the disparity between rural gravel roads and the paved roads in urban areas, emphasizing how this disparity deepens unequal access to services. This observation is consistent with the literature on rural-urban infrastructure divides, where rural areas tend to be neglected in state-led development initiatives (Wiggins & Proctor, 2001).

Participant 4 remarked on the deeply rural nature of ANDM, further underscoring the region's infrastructural challenges: "We do not have water, and

a lot of things in telecommunication. We have such poor infrastructure. Socially, we have no sports facilities” (personal communication, May 20, 2024). The lack of tarred roads, in particular, drastically limits access to vital services such as healthcare and education, while also curbing economic opportunities by restricting access to markets. This reinforces the findings of the African Development Bank (2019), which identified poor rural infrastructure as a significant barrier to economic development in Africa’s rural regions.

*5.3.2 Digital and communications barriers.* Participants also expressed concerns regarding the significant digital and communications barriers in ANDM. Participant 7 (personal communication, May 24, 2024) highlighted the region’s limited access to modern communication platforms, such as WhatsApp or online channels, due to the lack of fibre-optic infrastructure and stable mobile networks. This digital divide mirrors the broader challenges identified by Castells (2000), Ragnedda et al. (2022) and Heeks (2022), who argue that, in the network society, access to digital infrastructure is a critical determinant of inclusion or exclusion from the modern economy. In the case of ANDM, this exclusion manifests as limited access to timely information, which hampers economic and social development.

Participant 1 (personal communication, May 20, 2024) proposed that improving internet connectivity should be considered a fundamental right, as it would facilitate better access to information and enhance communication between residents and local governance structures. This reflects the growing recognition of digital infrastructure as a key component of human development (UNDP, 2017), where access to information is linked to improved governance outcomes and social inclusion. Without adequate digital infrastructure, residents cannot easily access municipal services or communicate with local authorities, further deepening their isolation and limiting their ability to participate in governance processes.

The lack of reliable internet and mobile connectivity places rural residents at a disadvantage in the modern economy, reducing their ability to access crucial information and resources that could improve their quality of life. Participant 1 (personal communication, May 20, 2024) noted that traditional methods of communication, such as community radio stations, are still in use. However, these were limited in scope and did not provide timely or comprehensive access to information. This echoes research by Heeks (2022), which states that a lack of access to digital tools and resources reinforces broader social and economic inequalities, particularly in rural areas.

Municipal IDPs and the Auditor-General's reports (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2023) corroborate the findings on infrastructure deficits and limited institutional responsiveness. For instance, the 2022/2023 IDP for Umzimvubu Municipality identifies persistent service backlogs in water provision and road maintenance, mirroring concerns raised by community participants about flooding, poor road quality, and limited access to clinics and schools. Similarly, the Auditor-General’s consolidated report (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2023) for the Eastern Cape (2021/2022) highlights significant weaknesses in municipal financial management, procurement inefficiencies, and capacity constraints. These issues align with participants’ observations of poor planning and delayed infrastructure projects. The convergence of these official assessments with lived experiences reinforces the argument that structural reforms are required to improve rural institutional resilience and service delivery outcomes.

#### **5.4 Environmental Challenges and Natural Resource Management in Rural Areas**

The data highlights the complex environmental and natural resource issues faced by rural areas such as the ANDM, particularly about water security, the underutilization of natural resources, and the challenge of harnessing these resources to enable sustainable economic growth. The district is emblematic of many rural regions where abundant natural resources are overshadowed by infrastructural deficiencies, environmental degradation, and inadequate resource management, which limit economic development. The paradox of rural areas being rich in resources yet economically underdeveloped is well-documented in the rural development literature (Bryceson, 2000; Mubangizi, 2024); ANDM is no exception.

*5.4.1 Environmental challenges.* Water security emerged as a primary concern among participants, with several pointing out that invasive alien plant species further compound the problem by threatening local ecosystems. Participant 1 (personal communication, May 20, 2024) emphasized the growing issue of water scarcity, noting that alien plants are encroaching on natural water systems, reducing water availability for both household use and agriculture. This reflects the broader environmental management challenges identified by Le Maitre et al. (2002), who argue that invasive species in South Africa degrade ecosystems and place additional pressure on already scarce water resources.

Participant 6 (personal communication, May 24, 2024) raised concerns about how water shortages impede daily life and agricultural activities in the Ntabankulu Locam Municipality. This underscores the vulnerability of rural communities, where access to clean water is often precarious. The situation in ANDM is not unique. However, it falls within the broader water crisis affecting many rural parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, where poor water infrastructure and environmental degradation exacerbate rural development challenges (Ashton & Turton, 2009).

*5.4.2 Underutilization of natural resources.* Despite the district's natural resources, including rivers, forests, and agricultural land, these assets remain underutilized. Participant 4 (personal communication, May 20, 2024) pointed out that while rivers are valuable, they are often polluted and do not fulfil their potential to support agriculture and tourism. Pollution, coupled with underdeveloped infrastructure, limits the ability of these natural assets to contribute to sustainable economic growth and reflects the role that environmental degradation can play as a key barrier to rural development in South Africa (Cilliers et al., 2013).

Participant 5 (personal communication, May 20, 2024) expanded on this, highlighting the diverse geography of the ANDM, which includes coastal and mountainous areas with significant potential for agriculture and tourism. The Umzimvubu River, in particular, was mentioned as a potential future driver of economic growth for the region. However, the challenge lies in converting these natural resources into tangible economic opportunities, as infrastructural and technical deficits prevent the district from fully harnessing its environmental wealth. This aligns with the broader academic understanding of 'resource curses,' where rural areas rich in natural assets fail to benefit economically due to weak systemic governance and inadequate infrastructure (Moti, 2019; Leonard et al., 2022).

Participant 6 (personal communication, May 24, 2024) emphasized the district's forestry potential, noting both commercial and Indigenous forests and other

resources like land that could be used for crop production, livestock farming, and sand mining. However, the participant pointed out that harnessing these natural resources for sustainable economic growth is challenging. This reflects the findings of Chambers (1983), Mubangizi (2021), and Rambe and Khaola (2023), who point out that rural development is often stymied not by a lack of resources but by a lack of mechanisms to convert resources into productive outputs effectively.

*5.4.3 The importance of natural resources for sustainable livelihood.* A focus group participant noted that natural resources, particularly forests, are crucial for subsistence. Residents rely on forests for firewood and traditional medicine, while agriculture remains predominantly subsistence-based, with crops and livestock grown primarily for household consumption. This reflects the broader reliance on natural resources for basic survival in many rural communities, where economic activities remain largely informal and small-scale (Ellis, 2000). While these resources sustain livelihoods, they do not generate economic growth that could lift communities out of poverty.

The underutilization of natural resources and reliance on subsistence farming highlight the structural issues faced by the ANDM. Without sufficient infrastructure, technical support, and investment, the district's natural assets may remain untapped, limiting the access of members of this community to broader economic opportunities.

## **5.5 Cultural Practices and Diversity**

Cultural diversity is a defining feature of the ANDM, enriching the region's social and economic life. The presence of multiple ethnic groups, including Basotho, AmaMpondo, AmaBhaca, and AmaXesibe communities, creates a tapestry of traditions that not only define the region's identity but also foster social cohesion and resilience in the face of challenges. Participant 7 (personal communication, May 24, 2024) emphasized the significance of cultural rituals, such as *intonjane* and *ulwaluko*, where the community gathers to celebrate the right of passage for girls and boys respectively, emphasizing that such ceremonies reinforce social bonds and foster a strong sense of belonging. These rituals, which often involve communal preparation and participation, reflect the social fabric of rural life, where collective action is central to cultural preservation and survival.

Participant 2 noted the district's rich cultural diversity, which extends across various ethnic groups, commenting that the "social dynamics of the community involve the close-knit relationships that the members of the communities have, and those strong community bonds" (personal communication, May 20, 2024). This diversity was viewed as a source of unity rather than division, reflecting the broader trend in rural areas where cultural practices serve as the bedrock for social cohesion. Another participant commented that these practices "help rural communities navigate the uncertainties of economic marginalisation and environmental hardships by reinforcing collective identity and providing continuity amid change" (participant 10, personal communication, May 24, 2024). This finding reinforces the key theme in rural development literature that maintaining cultural practices is a means of resilience. As seen in the work of Appadurai (1996), cultural rituals serve not only as a connection to the past but as a coping mechanism for contemporary challenges. Similarly, Koeneke (2018) analyzed traditional leadership's resilience and governance role in preserving cultural practices in rural South Africa. Njwambe et al. (2019) examined rural-

urban migration and the socio-cultural attachment to rural landscapes in South Africa, emphasizing resilience through cultural connection. Matlou and Bahta (2021) investigated agricultural resilience and the role of cultural practices in sustaining rural livelihoods in the Northern Cape province.

*5.5.1 Cultural practices as economic and social assets.* Participants highlighted that cultural diversity and heritage are central to the community's identity and offer potential for economic development through tourism. Participant 5 (personal communication, May 20, 2024) identified heritage sites of historical and political importance in Ntabankulu and Mbizana that could be developed to promote tourism. As the ANDM has produced numerous political figures, its historical significance and cultural richness could be harnessed to enhance its appeal as a destination for heritage tourism. Timothy and Boyd (2003) argue that heritage tourism can serve as a vehicle for economic development in rural areas, preserving cultural practices while simultaneously creating economic opportunities.

Participant 7's (personal communication, May 24, 2024) mention of the *intonjane* and *ulwaluko* rituals illustrates how cultural practices can serve as social and economic assets. Rituals like these, which involve community participation and collective labour, not only reinforce social bonds but also present an opportunity for the district to market its distinctive cultural assets to a broader audience. As rural development scholars such as Chambers (1983), Mubangizi (2021), and Rambe and Khaola (2023) have argued, leveraging cultural assets for economic gain is essential for fostering sustainable livelihoods in marginalized areas. By promoting their rich cultural traditions, communities in the ANDM may be able to attract both local and international tourists, contributing to economic growth in the area while preserving its heritage.

*5.5.2 Cultural and natural resources as pillars of sustainable development.* The interplay between cultural and natural resources in the ANDM offers a foundation for sustainable development. Participant 5 highlighted the region's natural beauty, including its rivers and forests, which, combined with its cultural heritage, create a distinctive identity that could be leveraged for social cohesion and economic development. The Umzimvubu River and various heritage landmarks are physical aspects of the district's cultural significance. These elements evoke a sense of pride among residents and present opportunities for tourism that could contribute to both local development and environmental preservation.

The district's cultural and natural resources are vital to its resilience. As Moser (1998) argues, building resilience in rural communities often depends on the capacity to leverage social and environmental assets. Participants stressed that by celebrating their cultural diversity and integrating natural beauty into development strategies, the district could strengthen social ties and foster sustainable economic growth. This reflects broader rural development theories that emphasize the need for place-based approaches, where cultural and environmental resources are central to fostering resilience and promoting sustainable livelihoods (Scoones, 2009).

## **6.0 Discussion**

This section synthesizes the study's key findings about its core objectives and theoretical framing. Drawing on institutional theory and the SLF, the discussion interprets how the resilience or fragility of local institutions shaped livelihood outcomes in Alfred Nzo District. The analysis engages existing literature to assess the extent to which the findings confirm, challenge, or extend theoretical

claims, particularly concerning institutional responsiveness, access to livelihood assets, and the adaptive capacity of rural households and governance systems.

### ***6.1 Opportunities in Alfred Nzo District Municipality***

The SLF and institutional theory provide a comprehensive lens through which to analyze the research findings from ANDM. These frameworks allow us to better understand how local communities manage their livelihoods amidst vulnerabilities and how formal and informal institutions shape access to resources and opportunities. The SLF emphasizes how households employ various livelihood strategies based on their access to assets, while institutional theory underscores the role of institutions in mediating access to these critical resources. In the case of Alfred Nzo District, the findings highlight how the district's geographic isolation, infrastructural deficits, environmental challenges, and rich cultural diversity intersect with institutional dynamics to shape development outcomes.

Considering the lenses of the SLF and institutional theory, the opportunities in ANDM are promising, particularly in its untapped potential for agriculture and tourism. The district's rich natural resources, which include fertile agricultural land, rivers, and scenic landscapes, provide a significant opportunity for growth if effectively harnessed. The SLF highlights that these natural assets (natural capital) form a strong foundation for sustainable livelihoods, especially when combined with strategies that promote market access, capacity-building, and infrastructure development. The Umzimvubu River, for instance, has been cited as a potential driver of economic growth, particularly in irrigation-based agricultural and eco-tourism. The district could realize its latent economic potential if formal and informal institutions could evolve to facilitate better resource management, technical support, and market linkages.

From an institutional perspective, the district's cultural diversity, which includes various ethnic groups and rich traditions, is another key asset that could be leveraged for tourism development. The region's heritage sites and cultural practices offer unique opportunities for cultural tourism, which could serve as a sustainable livelihood strategy while preserving the community's social fabric. Formal institutions, such as government tourism bodies, could be crucial in developing the necessary infrastructure and marketing the district's cultural and natural resources. Informal institutions, such as community norms and practices embedded in traditional institutions, could further reinforce this by fostering social cohesion and supporting local tourism initiatives. By aligning institutional efforts with the district's natural and cultural resources, the municipality could promote inclusive economic growth while maintaining its cultural heritage and preserving the natural environment.

### ***6.2 Challenges in Alfred Nzo District Municipality***

The geographic isolation and economic dependence of the ANDM exemplify the broader challenges rural areas face. These challenges, particularly limited infrastructure, inadequate access to formal employment, and over-reliance on government support, have created a cycle of poverty. The Sustainability Livelihoods Framework lends insight into the nature of this cycle: it emerges from the vulnerability of the district's context, where geographic isolation restricts access to markets, services, and employment opportunities. In such settings, physical capital, particularly infrastructure, is underdeveloped, and social and human capital (skills, education, and health) remain limited, constraining the livelihood strategies available to residents. Over-reliance on

government grants and subsistence farming as the primary means of survival reflects a lack of livelihood diversification, further entrenching poverty.

Institutional theory helps explain why this structural poverty persists. Formal institutions, policies, and governance structures may not be effective in fostering local economic development in key sectors like agriculture and tourism, despite the district's latent potential. Bureaucratic inefficiencies or misaligned priorities may hinder investment, while traditional institutions perpetuating social norms and cultural practices may not encourage the risk-taking or entrepreneurship needed for economic diversification. Institutional constraints on access to land, capital, and markets further limit the community's ability to develop alternative livelihood strategies. Consequently, poverty will likely remain entrenched in the district unless institutions evolve to support infrastructure development and economic growth.

The infrastructural deficits and communication barriers identified in the ANDM reflect another core challenge in rural development. These physical and digital deficits compound social inequalities by limiting access to essential services and information. The Sustainable Livelihood Framework reveals how these barriers hinder the development of key livelihood assets. Physical capital, particularly transportation and communication infrastructure, remains underdeveloped, restricting residents' access to markets, educational facilities, and healthcare services. In rural contexts, these gaps exacerbate the vulnerability of households, limiting their ability to engage in diversified livelihood strategies.

Institutional theory sheds light on the role of both formal and informal institutions in perpetuating these deficits. Formal institutions, such as government bodies, may fail to prioritize infrastructure investment in rural areas due to political, financial, or logistical challenges. This institutional failure limits access to physical assets and digital infrastructure, where inadequate communication networks isolate communities, further reducing their participation in economic activities. Without a comprehensive institutional approach to addressing these issues, the region may experience unequal access to essential services.

The ANDM faces significant environmental challenges regarding natural resources, including water scarcity and the underutilization of its rich environmental assets. The Sustainability Livelihood Framework reveals that, while abundant, natural capital, such as rivers, forests, and agricultural land, remains underexploited due to infrastructural and technical limitations. The lack of infrastructure, such as water management systems and transportation infrastructure, limits the productive use of these resources for agriculture and tourism, which could potentially transform the district's economy. Furthermore, inadequate technical support and capacity-building prevent the community from managing these natural assets effectively, leading to resource degradation and missed economic opportunities.

Institutional theory suggests that formal environmental policies and governance mechanisms may be either weak or poorly implemented in the district, contributing to this underutilization of assets. Additionally, informal institutions, including traditional practices related to land use and resource management, may not align with modern sustainable development principles, further hindering the conversion of natural capital into viable economic opportunities. Thus, the challenge is not simply a lack of assets but the necessary institutional capacity to mobilize these resources for sustainable economic development. Addressing these barriers requires an integrated approach incorporating environmental management, infrastructure development, and institutional reform.

Cultural diversity and natural resources also emerge as central to the ANDM identity and potential drivers of sustainable economic growth. The Sustainable Livelihood Framework views social capital, which, in this district municipality, is embodied in its rich cultural traditions and practices, as strengthening community cohesion and resilience in the face of socioeconomic challenges. Cultural practices, such as rituals and ceremonies, serve not only to reinforce social bonds but also offer potential avenues for economic development through cultural tourism. The district's heritage sites and cultural richness could attract visitors, providing an additional livelihood strategy to support local economic development.

From an institutional theory perspective, formal institutions must play a role in developing tourism infrastructure and marketing the municipality's cultural assets. Policies that promote sustainable tourism, protect cultural heritage, and ensure that the economic benefits of tourism are distributed equitably among the local population are essential. Simultaneously, informal institutions, such as traditional norms and practices, must adapt to the commercialization of culture without compromising its authenticity. This way, the district may preserve its cultural heritage while leveraging it for sustainable economic development.

In sum, the study's findings affirm that institutional resilience is pivotal to the sustainability of rural livelihoods. Where local governance structures were adaptive, inclusive, and responsive, communities demonstrated greater capacity to withstand shocks and maintain access to critical livelihood resources. Conversely, institutional weaknesses, manifesting as infrastructural deficits, fragmented service delivery, and limited stakeholder engagement, amplified community vulnerabilities. These insights reinforce SLF's emphasis on the role of transforming structures and processes in shaping livelihood outcomes and validate Institutional Theory's concern with the enabling or constraining power of institutional arrangements. The evidence points to the urgent need for institutional reforms that are both structural and relational, grounded in local realities and capable of supporting long-term rural resilience.

## 7.0 Recommendations

Grounded in the study's key findings and theoretical framing embodied in the Sustainability Livelihood Framework and institutional theory, the following recommendations respond directly to the study's focus on institutional capacity, livelihood strategies, and access to services and resources, thereby aligning with its three interrelated objectives to enhance institutional resilience and promote sustainable livelihoods in rural municipalities such as Alfred Nzo District.

- **Stronger investment is needed in infrastructure and digital connectivity.** One of the key barriers to development in the ANDM is the lack of adequate infrastructure, particularly roads, water supply, and communication networks. To promote economic development and enhance access to services, a concerted effort must be made to invest in physical and digital infrastructure. Improving road networks would facilitate market access for agricultural products and tourism, while enhancing digital connectivity would bridge the information gap, allowing residents to access vital e-governance services and engage in the modern economy. Public-private partnerships could be a key mechanism to finance and develop this infrastructure, fostering a more inclusive and connected rural economy.

- **Develop agriculture and tourism.** The district holds significant untapped potential for agriculture and tourism, sectors that could serve as catalysts for sustainable economic growth. To unlock this potential, institutions must evolve to provide local farmers and entrepreneurs with the necessary technical support, training, and market linkages. Introducing sustainable agricultural practices and value-added processing could increase productivity and income. Simultaneously, investment in eco-tourism and cultural tourism, leveraging the district's natural beauty and rich cultural heritage, could create new employment opportunities while preserving the environment and local traditions. These efforts should be backed by supportive policies that facilitate market access, provide incentives for innovation, and protect natural resources.
- **Reform institutions and build their capacity.** Institutional inefficiencies currently impede access to resources and opportunities, constraining the district's capacity for sustainable development. Strengthening formal institutions, such as governance structures and local economic development agencies, and informal institutions, including community-based organizations, is essential. This reform must prioritize equitable financial allocations from the central government, ensuring that fiscal transfers account for the weak revenue base of municipalities. Key measures include restructuring local governance to promote more responsive and accountable decision-making, building capacity among local leaders and officials, and empowering communities to engage in development planning actively. Strengthened institutions would be better positioned to manage resources effectively, deliver essential services, and foster an enabling environment for economic diversification.
- **Adopt sustainable resource management practices.** The underutilization of natural resources in the ANDM, particularly in agriculture, water, and forestry, presents an opportunity to adopt a sustainable approach to resource management. Implementing environmental management practices that protect these resources while allowing for their productive use is crucial. Capacity-building initiatives should equip communities with the skills and knowledge to manage natural resources sustainably. Furthermore, institutions must play an active role in regulating resource use, ensuring equitable access, and preventing over-exploitation and degradation, thus supporting long-term resilience and economic development.
- **Leverage cultural diversity to promote social cohesion and economic growth.** The cultural diversity characterizing the ANDM could serve as a foundation for social cohesion and economic development. Residents' social capital could be strengthened by preserving and celebrating cultural traditions, such as rituals and ceremonies, which could help to maintain community resilience and collective identity. The area's cultural diversity could be leveraged as an asset for tourism development. Local institutions could promote and support initiatives that integrate cultural heritage into tourism strategies, ensuring that the economic benefits from tourism are shared equitably while preserving the community's cultural heritage.
- **Integrate multi-sectoral development approaches.** Lastly, a multi-sectoral approach that integrates economic, social, environmental, and institutional strategies is essential for sustainable development in rural areas. Policymakers and development practitioners should adopt holistic

development frameworks that address the interconnectedness of livelihood assets and institutional dynamics. For instance, infrastructure improvements must be coupled with efforts to enhance human capital through education and training. At the same time, environmental management must go hand-in-hand with economic strategies that promote sustainable agriculture and tourism. Collaborative efforts across sectors and institutions could ensure that rural development strategies are comprehensive and inclusive, fostering resilience in the face of economic and environmental vulnerabilities.

## Declarations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal for this study.

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