

# Understanding pro-poor and rural friendly policy goals

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## Executive Summary

Policy decisions are often informed by data or examples from urban communities; and those are not reflective of the realities of rural residents.

Digital storytelling is an effective tool in teaching and learning, exploring important topics and a way of engaging social issues. In 2021 and 2022, nine digital stories explored rural livelihoods by bringing both the personal and the institutional dimensions into conversation in a manner that is relatable, engaging to a general audience, and relevant to policy thinking. These nine stories examine issues of relevance to sustainable rural livelihoods within South Africa's institutional structures. They highlight the complex network of actors and resources that rural households rely on. Critically, the stories are meant to advise policy makers and implementers to design effective and reflective rural policy in a manner that ensures that decisions are based on an understanding of the realities in rural spaces.

## Introduction

In 2021, the SARCHI Chair in Sustainable Local (Rural) Livelihoods launched a project to 'tell the stories' of the realities that rural residents from the Chair's research sites in South Africa. The focus of this project is on B4 municipalities which are in rural areas and are characterised by communal land ownership, traditional leadership, scattered groupings of houses; and most are in former homelands. Besides, most B4 municipalities are reliant on subsistence farming, remittances, and social welfare subsidies. Drawing from nine 'stories', the experiences of rural South Africans were illustrated [<https://sarchichair-slh.ukzn.ac.za/digital-stories/>]. Understanding these realities is a complex and difficult task. Often, policy decisions are informed by data or examples from urban communities and those may not be reflective of the realities of rural residents.

The stories illustrated that rural households rely on a network of actors and a variety of resources to sustain their rural livelihoods, summarised in six primary networks: physical resources, financial

resources, digital connectivity, social resources, natural resources, and transforming structures. Each of these networks offer opportunities and challenges. Development of adequate policy reflecting the interests of rural residents needs to understand these networks.

## Overview of Research

While the poor and the socially excluded in Western societies are likely to be found in urban areas, in South Africa, and indeed in most African countries, they are more likely to be found in rural areas of the country and are also most likely to be women. Processes that respond to poverty and social exclusion should take cognisance of not only the spatial aspects but also the gender dimension of poverty and exclusion. The role of the state is quintessential in bringing about meaningful change. This is pertinent to the South African context where many years of colonial and apartheid policies advanced rural subjugation with women bearing the brunt of these policies.

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It is critical to question the extent to which the nature, as well as the structure of the public sector's service delivery system, is cognisant of the rural-urban divide. It is also important to question the accessibility of the public sector to the socially excluded rural populace. Answering these questions is essential to designing long-term interventions for addressing social inclusion and rural poverty. The Chair in Sustainable Local (Rural) Livelihoods is posited in the theory and practice of Public Administration and focuses on the public service delivery system as critical to reducing social exclusion and poverty among the rural, mainly women. It examines the forward and backward linkages between the state and agencies and/or individuals responsible for implementing public services and anti-poverty programmes in rural areas.

Theoretically, the work of the Chair draws on three distinct but interrelated theories – organisational theory, intergovernmental relations (IGR) theory, and institutional theory. The Chair is geared towards unpacking how policy is understood, interpreted, and delivered by public officials (and the partners) in the context of rural poverty reduction and women empowerment. It examines the policy processes with a view to establishing those criteria that facilitate optimal implementation of policy in a manner that is gender sensitive, rural-friendly and pro-poor. In doing so, the work of the Chair supports the capacity of researchers and public

administrators to formulate and support effective public administration processes in responding to poverty and social exclusion within the framework of sustainable livelihoods.

### Overview of SARChI Digital Stories

The aforementioned nine digital stories highlight the realities that rural residents across South Africa experience. The stories range from four to 16 minutes and were recorded and uploaded onto the SARChI website. Digital storytelling is an effective tool in teaching and learning, allowing complex topics and social issues to be explored using a combination of storytelling and multimedia tools. These stories demonstrate both the opportunities and challenges that are faced and highlight the complex network of actors and services that are relied on.

The goal of these digital stories is to explore rural livelihoods by bringing both the personal and the institutional dimensions into conversation in a manner that is relatable, engaging to a general audience, and relevant to policy thinking.

### Summary of Findings

From the stories, six critical 'networks' have been identified as critical to support the long-term sustainability of rural livelihoods across South Africa. These have been divided into opportunities and challenges below.

## Opportunities

### Social Capital

Social capital is precious for communities that share land and is utilised to protect the common good, such as minimising overgrazing, preventing land degradation, and conserving springs - crucial resources for human existence. Social capital is critical for rural households' survival and development in both good and bad times. The research highlights that across and within rural communities, social capital is strong, demonstrating an opportunity for growth and development. Rural livelihood policy should consider and exploit strong social capital within these communities and develop novel policy solutions to support them.

### Natural Resources

Land and water resources are two key natural livelihood assets that lay the groundwork for all other assets. Not only is land necessary for rural livelihoods, but it is also symbolic and significant in terms of identity and belonging – particularly for dispossessed people. Thus, access to land may mean reclaiming dignity, cultural recovery, justice, and a higher standard of living.

The majority of South Africa's rural poor live under communal land tenure. This frequently involves agreements involving community or common property, such as forests and grazing fields, as well as the allotment of arable land plots for household agricultural activity. Traditional leaders are critical to tenure management and accomplishment. Civil society



**Figure 1:** *Rural areas are characterised by communal land ownership and scattered dwellings.*

groups also play an important role in resolving some of these land-related issues and assisting communities in making good use of their property.

### **Water and Climate**

In 1996, South Africa recognised water to be a fundamental human right. Legislative and policy frameworks have been constructed to guarantee that municipalities can provide an acceptable level of service and that all South Africans have equal access to water. Additionally, water management frameworks have been established to encourage community engagement in water governance. There is a need to integrate approaches to water challenges across social, ecological, and infrastructure systems, while decentralising decision-making through formal engagement of stakeholders in water management. Local government remains critical to such endeavours, and municipal integrated plans are a good place to start.

### **Transforming Structures**

Transforming structures and processes can be found at all levels, from the simplest rural home to global institutions that set important rules and norms. Transforming structures include public and private sector organisations that make policy and legislation, implement them, deliver services, and carry out other activities that affect livelihoods. Adequate policy that reflects rural natural resources, structures, and process are important to develop.

### **Livelihood Shocks**

Rural livelihoods are generally fragile and vulnerable to socioeconomic and environmental shocks. These have been exacerbated by climate change-related setbacks, such as droughts and prolonged dry seasons. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed the vulnerability of rural livelihoods.

On the other hand, resilient livelihoods are ones that can withstand and swiftly recover from such shocks, while resilient institutions are those that can assist communities in coping with calamities and quickly recover from their impacts. Response to the COVID-19 pandemic has shown how institutions can work collaboratively to support rural households in adverse situations. Through intergovernmental relations of joint planning and financial transfers, for instance, rural municipalities managed to cope. Sustainable rural livelihoods will require much stronger and self-reliant local institutions to be able to jointly plan relevant development strategies.

## Challenges

### Physical Resources

Regrettably, rural schools share an unenviable characteristic that they are at the bottom of national quintiles. The digital stories highlight the lack of resources as a major barrier to success. A reason for this is the existing policy that favours providing added resources to schools in higher income neighbourhoods. In addition to education limitations, access to medical clinics, police stations, and employment opportunities are hampered by inadequate road infrastructure. Difficult terrain and isolated housing settlements are added complications faced by rural residents, especially during the wet season.

### Financial Resources

Subsistence farming remains one of the most dominant employment sectors across rural regions, often providing insufficient wealth or livelihoods for farmers and their families. In response to this, public works programmes are sought to augment financial shortfalls. Current public works

programmes provide training for employment and microenterprises. However, these are not sustainable in the long term. Rural-focused entrepreneurial programmes that are reflective of the realities in rural spaces should be supported to help residents' diversity income streams.

### Digital Connectivity

Rural communities lack digital connectivity to support access to information, enable officials to carry out their activities, such as council meetings and benefit from the digital economy. This was mostly evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic with limited physical contact. With adequate connectivity, important services can be run from the most distant community in South Africa. Digitalisation has the potential to address severe rural difficulties, while also enhancing the sustainability and resilience of rural communities. Connectivity offers the ability to increase rural communities' participation in larger economies and governance systems.

## Implications for Policy Makers

Rural communities rely on social networks for comprehensive support. Through the digital stories, we have witnessed the value of such collaborations to boost rural livelihoods. Greater support to collaborative efforts between community members, local municipalities, civic society, private sector and traditional leaders will help.

- △ It is critical to understand the primary participants in networks and the governance of such networks for sustainable rural livelihoods. A concerted effort to identify the network of actors – drawn from local municipalities, civic society, private sector and traditional leaders is invaluable for sustainable rural livelihoods.
- △ The public service delivery system is critical to reducing social exclusion and poverty among the rural populace. While collaborative arrangements between community members, local municipalities, civic society, private sector and traditional leaders are valuable, the local government is the ultimate focal institution. Efforts to build the capacity of local government to provide service of the public good should be supported.
- △ Adequate and reflective public policies that support sustainable rural livelihoods are critical to ensure the long-term resilience of rural communities.



**Figure 2:** *Access to medical clinics, police stations, and employment opportunities are hampered by inadequate road infrastructure*

## **Cite this policy brief**

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