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Building resilient and sustainable rural livelihoods in South Africa

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Ensuring the resilience and sustainability of rural livelihoods requires innovative strategies and policy thinking. Resilience and sustainability can be achieved through developing the right skills and capacity in the right people, investing in rural infrastructure to take advantage of reverse migration, strengthening social capital through partnerships, investing in the transformation of local institutions, and good service delivery.

What is the Issue?

The fragility of rural livelihoods and their vulnerability to shocks is well established (Jamshed et al., 2020). The impact of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on rural livelihoods has impressed this reality and exposed even deeper weaknesses of the social, environmental and governance systems that are supposed to protect and sustain livelihoods. Additionally, challenges with deep roots in unresolved legacies of apartheid, poor investment in rural infrastructure, and corruption remain during such vulnerable moments. The worsening inequalities, poverty, unemployment, insecurity and administrative failures during the lockdown periods (Waly et al., 2020) demonstrated the critical role of institutions-government authorities, regulations, or processes - in transforming livelihoods for better or worse.

The task is, therefore, to not simply understand these dynamics of rurality and rural livelihoods in South Africa but to increasingly deepen such understanding through more nuanced engagement and translating lessons into actionable policies and solutions. Therefore, given all we know and keep learning about rural livelihoods in South Africa, how can they be made more resilient and sustainable at all times, including during disturbances and shocks?



Figure 1: Communal lands are prone to land degradation from invasive alien vegetation

Why is it important?

Many challenges are directly linked to the inability of people to earn a living in rural communities sustainably. Amongst others, these include rural-urban migration of young people, which undermines rural development while adding pressure to urban infrastructure and expanding informal settlements, which often have high risks to life, health and well-being (Mubangizi, 2021). A more robust rural economy

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addresses these and translates into more robust and more resilient urban areas. Rural economies are not static; they continually change to respond and adapt to persistent lack of job opportunities, degradation of public infrastructure and diminishing agriculture (Francis, 2019). Sustainable and resilient rural livelihoods will help reduce the negative impact of these changes.

What have we learned?



Figure 2: Some rural women earn a living from through public works programs by clearing invasive alien vegetation. With the proper support, such short-term employment can be a springboard to establishing productive rural enterprises.

The SARChI in Sustainable Rural Livelihoods has extensively studied rural livelihoods vulnerabilities and prospects. Between 2020 and 2022, this included creating podcast series and a nine-part series of digital stories. A combination of different digital media and storytelling types has helped to explore rural livelihoods, bringing personal/household and institutional dimensions of livelihoods into the conversation in a manner that powerfully communicates realities to guide policy thinking. These were also essential learning processes, and some of the key lessons learned include:

- The informal economy that prevails in rural communities does not have the essential skills, human resources, and expertise for developing local enterprises and the resilience required to bounce back or rebuild after disasters such as COVID-19. The dominant understanding of urban-rural socio-economic interaction mainly views the rural young as migrating to urban areas for better opportunities. As such, the United Nations projects that by 2030, 71.3% of South Africa's population will be in urban areas (Mlambo, 2018). We have learned, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, that this can be reversed. When urban systems fail, people seek solace and survival by returning to their rural homes and traditions. The hardships in cities at the height of the pandemic saw many people relocating to rural areas.
- Social capital is at the heart of everyday support and sustainability in rural communities. Having networks and relationships based on kinship, faith, stokvels, neighbourliness, traditional institutions, and other interests and ties. These relationships are, arguably, the most resilient aspect of rural livelihoods. While

stresses and disasters may negatively impact them, they also provide an avenue for coping, resilience and adaptability during such crises. This has been evident in the COVID-19 pandemic. The most vulnerable households were identified and reached through traditional leaders, religious groups and civic organisations.

Government policies, such as lockdown regulations, and institutions, such as municipalities are powerful and relevant

transforming structures. They can immensely and dramatically change lives and communities negatively or positively. The struggles of such systems manifest in the people they are meant to serve. Thus, the failures and administrative challenges of local municipalities not only limit their capacity to deliver narrowly basic services; they gradually contribute to overall suffering and degradation of the livelihoods of communities.

What are the Policy Options?

Invest significantly in skills development and building the human resources capacity of rural communities. This creates the potential for local enterprises to thrive, be resilient, and can cope or bounce back following disasters for improved livelihoods. People can sustain and rebuild their lives if they have the skills and resources.

- Improving transport infrastructure will encourage economic growth in rural areas by helping rural enterprises.
- There is a need to invest in rural infrastructure and make them able to accommodate reversed migration and coping when urban systems fail. Adequate rural infrastructure could encourage people to thrive in environments that are better suited for their conditions and business capacity, thereby preventing the situation where individuals struggle in urban areas and only return to rural areas when they have lost everything and cannot re-establish themselves in such areas.
- Government institutions, particularly the local municipality, need to be transformed so that they can in turn, transform rural livelihoods sustainably by forging and encouraging partnerships and service provider networks with communities, civic organisations, traditional leaders, and other

levels of government. The municipality should implement programs that explore and create partnerships and strengthen existing social networks that serve as important support systems for community members.

- Traditional leaders hold a vital position in the lives of rural communities. Among others, they are crucial in the administration of communal land resources. Supporting this local institution will go a long way in building the resilience of rural livelihoods.
- Young people and women hold a non-negotiable place in the future of rural livelihoods; they are among the most affected and capable of playing a central role in ensuring sustainability. There should be efforts to engage them directly to understand how they are affected, the impact of factors such as unemployment on their mental health, and what strengths and advantages they can bring to the transformation of rural means of earning a living.
- Ensuring adequate and timely delivery of quality public services in rural areas remains one of the most essential ways to strengthen local livelihoods and provide individuals and businesses with the foundations they need to earn a living and thrive.

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