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Rural Master Planning in Zimbabwe: A New Paradigm for Change or a New Window for Putting Pressure on the Rural Poor?

TINASHE MAGANDE¹, OLIVER KUWA² AND WENDY W TSORIYO³

Abstract

This study critically examines the implications of rural master planning in Zimbabwe, questioning whether it represents a new paradigm for positive change or merely exacerbates existing challenges and structural inequalities faced by the rural poor. The key argument of the study is that while rural master planning initiatives are often touted as instruments for rural development and progress, they can inadvertently marginalise and dispossess vulnerable rural populations. The aim of the study is to critically analyse the impact of rural master planning on the socio-economic dynamics of rural communities in Zimbabwe. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the question of whether rural master planning initiatives genuinely address the needs and aspirations of the rural poor or merely serve as mechanisms for exerting control and exploitation. The methodology employed in this study includes data collection through extensive literature review and analysis of policy documents related to rural planning in Zimbabwe. Additionally, qualitative textual analysis of relevant documents and reports was conducted to reveal underlying narratives and power dynamics. The study concludes that rural master planning in Zimbabwe often prioritises elite interests and fails to adequately consider the socio-economic realities of rural communities, leading to displacement,

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dispossession and exacerbated inequality. As such, the study recommends that rural planning initiatives should prioritise participatory approaches, community empowerment and equitable resource allocation to ensure genuine development and inclusivity in rural areas.

Keywords: rural development, marginalisation, inequalities, dispossession, community empowerment, resource allocation

INTRODUCTION

Rural master planning in Zimbabwe has emerged as a powerful tool for addressing the challenges faced by the rural poor. However, there is an ongoing debate regarding whether such planning initiatives truly serve as a catalyst for positive change, or if they exacerbate the marginalisation and hardships faced by the rural poor. The study of master planning should, therefore, be considered as an important entry point into understanding and rethinking the contemporary politics of rural and urban planning, implementation and development in Africa (Harrison, 2022). This article explores the concept of rural master planning, its potential consequences and its impact on the marginalised communities in Zimbabwe. It evaluates whether this approach truly offers a new paradigm for change or merely exacerbates the marginalisation it seeks to alleviate. In recent years, Zimbabwe has witnessed a surge in rural master planning initiatives aimed at developing comprehensive strategies to uplift marginalised rural areas. Such plans encompass a wide range of interventions, including infrastructure development, land reform, social programmes and economic initiatives. Proponents argue that these plans provide a holistic approach to addressing the deeply entrenched issues faced by the rural poor. However, critics contend that it can inadvertently perpetuate the marginalisation of vulnerable communities. They argue that the planning processes often neglect the needs and aspirations of the rural poor, resulting in top-down solutions that do not adequately consider their lived

experiences. By favouring the biased development, such planning approaches can exacerbate the resource divide between urban and rural areas, further entrenching rural poverty.

One critical aspect to consider is the historical and political context in Zimbabwe. Decades of colonial rule and post-independence challenges have compounded rural marginalisation. The legacy of discriminatory policies and inadequate resource allocation has engrained a sense of powerlessness among rural communities. This study explores the implications of rural master planning in Zimbabwe, aiming at scrutinising whether it heralds a new era of positive change or aggravates existing challenges confronting the rural poor. Emphasizing that rural master planning initiatives are often heralded as vehicles for development but may inadvertently marginalise vulnerable rural populations, the study critically analyses their impact on the socio-economic dynamics of rural communities in Zimbabwe. Employing extensive literature review and analysis of policy documents, alongside qualitative textual analysis of relevant materials, the research examines whether rural master planning initiatives genuinely address the needs and aspirations of the rural poor or merely serve as mechanisms for control and exploitation.

The rest of article assumes the following structure: following this introduction, is the conceptual framework, establishing the theoretical underpinnings and key concepts guiding the study. This is followed by a comprehensive literature review that synthesises existing research and provides context for the study. The research methodology section outlines the approach, methods and data collection techniques employed in the study. The findings section presents the results of the research, often accompanied by data, statistics and interpretations. Subsequently, the discussion section critically analyses the findings in relation to the literature and conceptual framework, identifying patterns, implications and limitations. Finally, the conclusion and recommendations section

summarises the key findings, discusses their implications and offers suggestions for future research or practical applications.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework guiding this study is based on several interrelated aspects, including rural master planning, marginalisation of the rural poor and rural development. These are interlinked and tethered theoretical concepts that determine the implications of rural master planning for analysis purposes. When explored from the perspective of the relation between rural development plans and experiences narrated by marginalised rural populations and the greater context of economic progress and social equality, this concept's background offers an analytical perspective on the rural planning processes. By critically exploring these key aspects, this article aims to identify the variables that underpin the socio-economic context for rural communities in the country, highlighting possible implications and challenges and emerging opportunities for rural master planning.

Master planning entails the formulation and implementation of comprehensive strategies designed to improve rural and urban areas. Harisson and Croese (2023) see master planning as an approach to prescribe and promote spatial comprehensiveness in shaping both rural and urban spaces over time. It encompasses various aspects such as land use, infrastructure development, resource management and social services provision. The over-arching goal is to enhance the well-being of rural communities by boosting economic opportunities, reducing poverty and improving their overall quality of life. In most developing countries, such as Zimbabwe, the master plans and local plans are the two main planning instruments used to guide urban development (Mabaso *et al.*, 2015). The major focus of planning is to evaluate the implementation of master plans (*ibid.*).

Master plans or local development plans can be defined as policies that contain the development vision of a community over a defined period of time, usually over a long-term period, like 15-30 years (though the length may vary from one country to another) (Chirisa, 2021:98).

As such, Oppenheim (1985), cited in Meyers *et al.* (2008:29), defines master planning as a process that:

“involves the definition of the principles which will guide the evolution of the area, towards desired objectives, in a comprehensive, long range and coordinated manner”.

Master plans are not limited to land use issues only, they also go beyond addressing social, economic and environment development issues. They further go to address human settlement dynamics to achieve different outcomes. Master plans have been used in guiding development through design, planning and architecture and other strategies shaping the built environment with the overall aim of betterment of human life and increasing health and safety since the industrial revolution (Firley and Groen, 2014). The main orientation of master planning is spatial planning and development (Gallent *et al.*, 2008), but, generally, they work beyond this scope. The components and scope of master plans vary from one area to another (Perera and Khailan, 2017).

A key concern associated with rural master planning in Zimbabwe is the potential for further marginalisation of the already vulnerable rural poor. While these planning initiatives aim to uplift rural communities, inadequate consideration of the needs, aspirations and existing socio-economic challenges of the rural poor could inadvertently reinforce disparities. This raises questions about the extent to which such planning processes genuinely empower marginalised groups. Zondi and Qwabe (2022) underscore that development challenges faced by rural areas are linked to the marginalisation of the poor. The Inclusive Rural Development Theory suggests that with improved physical infrastructure, the benefits of economic growth are evenly distributed among rural inhabitants as they participate in it (*ibid.*). With reference to Zimbabwe that borrows heavily from British physical and spatial planning, development is defined as carrying out any building or mining operations in, on, under or over, any land, the subdivision or consolidation of land, or making any change in the use of land. This is

explicitly spelt out in section 22 of the Regional, Town and Country Planning (RTCP) Act (Chapter 29, 12).

Rural development became a planning concern as it became clear that the strategies adopted in developing countries remained largely ineffective in alleviating poverty and inequalities in rural areas (Aslam, 2004). It is the process of improving the quality of life and economic well-being of people living in rural areas, often relatively isolated and sparsely populated areas. It aims at finding ways to improve rural lives with the participation of rural people themselves, to meet the required needs of rural communities (*ibid.*). The increasing interest in rural development is in improving the living standards of rural populations in terms of education, health, infrastructure, environment, social welfare and governance (Atkinson, 2017). Its primary objectives are to improve the living standards by providing food, shelter, clothing, employment and education. Secondly, to increase productivity in rural areas and reduce poverty. Moreover, it seeks to involve people in planning and development through their participation in decision-making and through decentralisation of administration, and, finally, to ensure distributive justice and equalisation of opportunities in the society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THEORETICAL REVIEW

The Inclusive Rural Development Theory entails the support rendered by government to significantly reduce social inequalities for all rural inhabitants (Gnade *et al.*, 2016:2). This support extends to promoting infrastructure accessibility to bring about socio-economic changes in rural communities. However, evidence from the empirical data reveals a lack of universal access to basic services such as water, energy and roads because of dispersed settlements. In turn, the inaccessibility challenges pose a threat to development initiatives such as education. As advocated by the Inclusive Rural Development Theory, infrastructure development involves providing capability and

opportunities for the general welfare of the rural populace (Ghosh, 2017:1). The social dimension of this theory entails the support rendered by government to significantly reduce social inequalities for all rural inhabitants (Gnade *et al.*, 2016:2). This support extends to promoting infrastructure accessibility to bring about socio-economic changes in rural communities. The political dimension of the theory espoused the urgent need for well-crafted policy interventions and legislation if progressive, inclusive rural development is to be embraced (Ghosh, 2017:20). Therefore, appropriate policies that are pertinent to the needs of rural communities must be adopted, with the community being fairly represented to participate in such decision-making, if rural development is to be inclusive.

MASTER PLANNING IN AFRICA

During the first two decades of the 2000s, there had been a resurgence in master planning in Africa (Harrison and Croese, 2023). The spatial development of new city strongly requires master planning (*ibid.*). This has spurred the return of master planning in Africa. Egypt witnessed the building of 20 new towns post-1970s (Hegazy and Moustafa, 2013). The first wave of new cities in Africa was witnessed in North Africa in the 2000s, followed by a wave in the sub-Saharan Africa between 2008-2009, just before the global financial crisis when Africa's economic growth and property values were at their pick (Harrison and Croese, 2023). The development of the new city of Kilamba on the outskirts of Angola's capital, Luanda, opened the path, being described as a Chinese exported urbanism (Croese, 2012). Other proposed sites came after and were abandoned in Kenya and Tanzania (Baraka, 2021).

The third wave of recent new cities came around 2010 when the New Zealand-born entrepreneur, Stephen Jennings, shifted his attention from Moscow, where he had established his financial services firm, Renaissance Capital, to Africa. His property development subsidiary, Rendeavour, targeted the expanding middle-class market in developments around the edge of large cities in Nigeria, Ghana,

Kenya and Zambia. For the master planning, Jennings has used mainly the services of the London offices of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM), a large international planning and design firm headquartered in the USA, but South African firms are being employed for his more recent developments (Jennings, 2016). Master planning for many of these new cities is design-based with lead consultants often being architects. For private sector-led initiatives, marketing is critical and so there is a strong emphasis on the visual element of master planning (Watson, 2020). While the master planning of new cities is no longer on the curriculum of architecture and planning schools in the West, large Western planning firms are designing entire new cities in Africa (Provoost, 2013). Provoost (*ibid.*) points to a contradiction as the building of new cities in Africa is still dominated by international consultants from Europe and North America. South African firms have also entered the broader African market and planning capacities are emerging in cities including Nairobi, Harare and Accra (Harrison and Croese, 2023).

The proliferation of master plans for new cities has also been a resurgence of master planning for existing cities (*ibid.*). With existing cities, there is no possibility of designing from scratch and the master plan must deal with complex existing urban environments, with many interests and actors (Cirolia and Berrisford, 2017). Harrison and Croese (2023) highlight the presents of a gap in the exploration of how local actors are interacting with international players in master planning processes in Africa.

The motivations of international players for supporting master planning are equally diverse and may range from geopolitical competition and downstream opportunities for projects, to the development mandates of multilateral agencies. Japan has had a growing interest in Africa's master planning since 2008, reflecting the dominance of infrastructural focus and increasing Asian urbanism in urban planning (Van Noorloos and Leung, 2016). European agencies, like Agence Française de Développement (AFD), support planning

processes in Africa but avoid the term ‘master planning’. The World Bank has an ambivalent position on master planning as it cannot directly contradict its member states supporting master planning processes. It launched its City Resilience Programme in 2017 that promoted rapid assessment as a method, in contrast to longer-term master planning processes. The UN Habitat has been more forthright in presenting alternatives to, if not distancing itself from, practices of master planning (UN Habitat, 2021). The AfDB, supports local planning processes rather than on master planning (AfDB, 2019).

In addition to comprehensive or multi-sectoral master plans, there has also been a rapid rise in sector-based master plans, including urban transport/mobility master plans, water and sanitation master plans, energy master plans and ICT master plans, to support the delivery of infrastructure-based mega projects. These plans generally have a strong engineering component and are supported by similar international agencies, such as the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the World Bank, AFD and AfDB and reflect both the demands of a global infrastructure turn (Schindler and Kanai, 2021) and local demands for developmental infrastructure and service delivery (Pieterse *et al.*, 2018). Master planning in Africa is a crowded field with diverse local and international players. Master planning in Africa challenges the European perspective of seeing it as a declining colonial practice. The implementation of the practice is, however, poor in Africa as some, or most of them, are partially implemented with unintended results (Van Noorloos *et al.*, 2019).

A critical factor influencing the outcomes of rural master planning is the level of meaningful participation afforded to rural communities, particularly the rural poor. Inclusive and participatory planning processes which involve genuine collaboration between stakeholders can ensure that the voices and perspectives of the rural poor are heard and integrated into the decision-making processes. This can help to address their unique needs and challenges more effectively and ensure that planning initiatives genuinely benefit them. In Africa,

master planning has been extensively critiqued for being a colonial imposition, modelled on modernist visions of utopian urban futures that are unable to handle existing contextual needs and realities (Bwanyika, 1989). In Europe, critiques of traditional master planning have spurred calls for more strategic, collaborative and relational forms of spatial planning (Albrechts, 2006). Harisson and Croese (2023) posit that master planning is a colonial legacy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilises a secondary research methodology, mainly desk research, to critically explore the mechanics of rural master planning in Zimbabwe and its outcomes for the rural underprivileged. Desk research comprised the examination and evaluation of current literary works, official publications and datasets on the discussion topic. Secondary data collection relied on a thorough examination of the literature, sourced from numerous academic articles, books and governmental orders concerning rural planning advancements. In this respect, developing and developed countries are chosen to aid in bridging the knowledge disparity and detecting global patterns and experiences. Exploration of suitable academic articles and reports was undertaken using Google Scholar and Libgen search engines.

Data collected through the literature review were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes, patterns and insights related to rural master planning and its impact on the rural poor. Additionally, textual analysis was employed to delve deeper into the content of selected documents, extracting nuanced meanings and underlying narratives. Content analysis was also utilised to analyse data extracted from policy documents, providing insights into the regulatory frameworks and governmental initiatives related to rural planning in Zimbabwe. In addition to the literature review, this study adopts a case study approach to examine specific instances of rural master planning initiatives in Zimbabwe. Case studies provided valuable insights into practical experiences and real-world

implementations, complementing the theoretical perspectives derived from the literature review. Through the triangulation of data from various sources and methodologies, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of rural master planning in Zimbabwe and its implications for the rural poor.

FINDINGS

Rural master planning initiatives in Zimbabwe, like in many other regions, wield a dual-edged sword, capable of both uplifting and disenfranchising the rural poor. While proponents argue that such plans facilitate infrastructure development, service accessibility and economic opportunities, thereby reducing poverty and inequality, the reality often reflects a more complex narrative. Zimbabwe's President Mnangagwa's call to develop master plans by June 2024 has been described as historic (*The Herald*, 18 March 2024). However, the progress in rural areas, particularly in Mashonaland Central and Beitbridge, reveals both promise and potential challenges in this endeavour.

On the positive side, rural master planning lays the groundwork for improved infrastructure and essential services, catering to the needs of growing populations while preserving the community's character and identity. By incorporating diverse perspectives from stakeholders such as communities, planners, private contractors and local authorities, these plans strive to engender strong, engaged communities with a stake in their own development. Through inclusive processes, citizens gain a deeper understanding of local challenges and are more likely to support ongoing projects, ensuring the sustainability of initiatives. Moreover, having a master plan signals deliberate, forward-thinking community planning, instilling confidence in investors and attracting those aligned with long-term sustainable development goals. These plans set aspirational benchmarks for growth and development, adaptable to changing circumstances over time.

However, the downside emerges when planning processes prioritise external interests over the needs of the rural poor. In such cases, marginalised communities may face displacement, loss of land rights and disruption of traditional livelihoods. The lack of universal access to basic services further compounds inequalities, hindering socio-economic progress and development initiatives such as education. The case of Zimbabwe is not isolated, for across Africa, there has been a re-surgence in master planning, particularly for new cities and existing urban areas. Yet, the dominance of international consultants and the historical baggage of colonial legacies raise questions about whose interests these plans truly serve. The gap in understanding how local actors interact with international players underscores the need for more inclusive and participatory approaches to master planning.

The Inclusive Rural Development Theory emphasizes the importance of government support in reducing social inequalities and promoting infrastructure accessibility. However, for such initiatives to be truly inclusive, policies must be tailored to the specific needs of rural communities, with genuine representation and participation in decision-making processes. The ongoing review of master plans in some places across the country, highlights a proactive approach to urban development, acknowledging the need to adapt to changing socio-economic and environmental conditions. The incorporation of stakeholder input, including government officials and local residents, underscores a commitment to inclusive decision-making and community engagement. By adopting a forward-thinking approach and addressing challenges such as flooding, the city aims to foster resilience and sustainability while preparing for future growth. Commitment to developing a master plan reflects a broader national agenda to enhance service delivery and modernise local authorities in line with the vision of an upper-middle-income economy by 2030. Through stakeholder engagement and adherence to legal frameworks, the municipality seeks to address key concerns such as unplanned development and land management issues. President Mnangagwa's

directive underscores the urgency and importance of such initiatives in advancing rural development and improving governance at the local level.

Despite historical challenges, some provinces are making strides in developing master plans for its towns, aligning with President Mnangagwa's emphasis on sound management in local authorities. The accelerated timeline for plan development raises concerns about compromising quality, but efforts are underway to ensure adequate training and data collection to inform the planning process. By adhering to legal requirements and hierarchical planning structures, the region aims to chart a comprehensive roadmap for future development and service delivery, albeit within tight timeframes. While rural master planning holds promise for development, its success hinges on meaningful participation and collaboration with rural communities. By amplifying the voices and perspectives of the rural poor, planning initiatives can better address their unique challenges and pave the way for more equitable and sustainable development in Zimbabwe and beyond.

CASE STUDIES

The case study section presented herein aims to explore the issues of master planning within the Zimbabwean context, bridging the gap between urban and rural settings. Traditionally, master planning has been predominantly associated with urban areas, yet its principles and applications hold significant value for rural development as well. Focusing on key regions such as Bulawayo, Beitbridge and Mashonaland Central Province, this section endeavours to extract invaluable lessons from master planning initiatives undertaken in both urban and rural landscapes of Zimbabwe. By scrutinising these different contexts, the study aims to discern commonalities, challenges and best practices that inform comprehensive planning strategies conducive to sustainable development across varied geographical settings. Through an exploration of these case studies, the study seeks to provide holistic insights into effective master

planning methodologies, encompassing urban and rural dynamics alike.

CASE STUDY: BULAWAYO

The City of Bulawayo is currently undergoing a comprehensive review of its operative Master Plan (2000-2015) and preparing the Bulawayo Master Plan for the period 2019-2034. This process is being facilitated through town planning consultants, Job Jika & Associates (Pvt) Ltd. The local authority convened its second Master Plan stakeholder consultative meeting on December 9, 2020, at the Small City Hall, graced by the Honourable Judith Ncube, Bulawayo Metropolitan Province Minister of State for Provincial Affairs and Devolution. Mr. Wisdom Siziba, the Acting Town Planning Director, elucidated on the significance of a master plan, describing it as a dynamic long-term statutory planning policy document that provides a conceptual layout to guide future growth and development of the whole city. He emphasized the integration of buildings, social settings and surrounding environments within the Master Plan that includes analysis, recommendations and proposals for various aspects such as population, economy, housing, transportation, community facilities and land use.

Under section 14(1) of the Regional Town, Country and Planning Act (Chapter 29:12), the local planning authority is mandated to prepare and submit a master plan, directed by the responsible minister. The Master Plan Review entails a study report, a written statement outlining the vision for Bulawayo, goals, objectives and strategies, accompanied by relevant maps, diagrams and descriptive matter. The consultant, Tiseetso Dube, highlighted that the operational Master Plan for Bulawayo, prepared in 2000, is over 19 years old, necessitating a review due to significant changes in physical, economic, social and environmental conditions. Population projections indicate a substantial increase by the end of 2034, with corresponding land needs for residential, employment, open space and social/community purposes. Despite available developable land

within the current municipal boundary, expansion outside this boundary is deemed necessary to meet projected land requirements.

Three spatial growth and development options were deliberated, with option two, involving the expansion of the Master Plan boundary after full utilisation of existing land, being adopted. The goals of the Master Plan aim to ensure the availability of suitable land, establish a sustainable local economic base, provide adequate social and community facilities, develop an efficient transportation system, foster environmental consciousness and establish forward-thinking management. The Honourable Ncube urged stakeholders to collaborate for the success of the Master Plan, emphasizing preparedness for natural disasters such as flooding experienced in Cowdray Park suburb. Upon adoption by the council, the Master Plan will undergo a two-month public exhibition period, during which objections or representations can be made before its submission to the Minister of Local Government. The meticulous planning and stakeholder engagement in the development of the Bulawayo Master Plan underscore the commitment to sustainable urban development, aiming to address current and future challenges while fostering resilience and inclusivity within the city.

CASE STUDY: BEITBRIDGE

Beitbridge Municipality has initiated a process to engage local stakeholders in developing a master plan that will guide development and service delivery over the next 15 to 20 years. This initiative is a response to President Mnangagwa's "Call to Action" concept, aiming to elevate the standard of service delivery by local authorities to reflect that of a standard upper-middle-income economy.

Concerns outlined in Beitbridge's master planning process include revenue collection and distribution, compliance with laws and the management of land leases and sales by local authorities, including communal and agricultural land. Mr. Loud Ramakgapola, Beitbridge's Town Clerk, underscored the municipality's commitment to

implementing the Call-to-Action plan, emphasizing the importance of community involvement in crafting a shared vision for improved service delivery. Stakeholder engagement, including with the Beitbridge Rural District Council (RDC), is integral to ensuring meaningful development and minimising conflicts.

The launch of the Call to Action highlighted unplanned development as a major concern, prompting collaborative efforts between the town council and Beitbridge RDC to address development and service delivery challenges. The modernisation and renewal of local authorities, as envisaged under the Call for Action concept, entail both improving corporate governance and implementing plans tailored to each local authority's renewal and modernisation consistent with the 2030 upper-middle-income economy vision. President Mnangagwa's directive to expedite implementation underscores the urgency of these measures, signalling a commitment to advancing rural development in Zimbabwe through comprehensive master planning initiatives.

CASE STUDY: MASHONALAND CENTRAL

Only four out of eight towns in Mashonaland Central have attempted to develop strategic spatial plans since independence in 1980. Mvurwi and Mt. Darwin each developed local development plans in 1992 and 2003, respectively, while Bindura crafted a master plan in 1999. The Mazowe Rural District Council initiated an incomplete master plan that remained as a report. The lead planner in Mashonaland Central emphasized the concerted efforts to deliver these master plans within a tight timeframe set by President Mnangagwa.

This legally compliant preparation of master plans responds to President Mnangagwa's emphasis on sound management in local authorities. The master plans are expected to provide a roadmap for local authorities to operate and deliver services over the next two decades. However, the accelerated timeline, with plans expected to be ready in less than half a year, compared to previous timelines of

two to three years, raises concerns about compromising the quality of the plans being prepared. Mudede, as quoted in *The Herald* (18 March 2024), highlights the hierarchical structure of master planning, beginning with a regional plan covering the entire province, followed by district-specific master plans. Planners have undergone training and lead planners have been deployed, with primary and secondary data collection yet to be completed, to address existing data gaps. The drafting of planning proposals and creation of maps for the entire district in Mashonaland Central was scheduled for May 2024.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study shed light on the complex interplay between rural master planning initiatives and their impact on the socio-economic dynamics of rural communities in Zimbabwe. Despite being promoted as tools for rural development and progress, the results suggest that these initiatives often carry unintended consequences, particularly for vulnerable rural populations.

One of the key findings underscores the potential of rural master planning to positively influence the lives of rural residents. Improved infrastructure, access to basic services and increased economic opportunities, are among the benefits touted by proponents of master planning. Indeed, these elements are crucial for fostering development and reducing inequalities in rural areas. However, it is essential to critically assess whether these benefits are equitably distributed across all segments of the rural population. On the flipside, the study reveals that rural master planning can exacerbate marginalisation and dispossession among vulnerable rural communities. When planning processes prioritise the interests of external actors or fail to consider the specific needs of the rural poor, these communities often bear the brunt of adverse outcomes. Displacement from land, disruption of traditional livelihoods and limited access to basic services are among the challenges faced by marginalised populations.

The case studies presented in the results section provide valuable insights into the realities of rural master planning in Zimbabwe. In Bulawayo, for instance, while there is a concerted effort to engage stakeholders and ensure a comprehensive review of the master plan, the expansion of the plan boundary raises questions about land rights and access for rural communities. Similarly, in Beitbridge and Mashonaland Central, initiatives to develop master plans are framed within national agendas for economic development and governance reform. However, concerns about unplanned development and the accelerated timeline for plan development highlight potential risks for vulnerable rural populations. Overall, the findings underscore the importance of adopting a critical lens when assessing the impact of rural master planning initiatives. While these initiatives hold promise for rural development, they must be accompanied by safeguards to protect the rights and interests of vulnerable rural populations. Meaningful participation and collaboration with local communities are essential to ensure that planning processes are inclusive, responsive and equitable. Moreover, policy interventions should be guided by principles of social justice and sustainability, prioritising the needs of marginalised groups and promoting inclusive rural development in Zimbabwe.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has provided a critical analysis of the impact of rural master planning on the socio-economic dynamics of rural communities in Zimbabwe. While rural master planning initiatives are often positioned as instruments for rural development and progress, the findings suggest a deeper understanding of the reality. On one hand, these initiatives have the potential to improve infrastructure, access to services and economic opportunities, contributing to poverty alleviation and reduced inequalities. However, they also carry inherent risks of marginalisation and dispossession, particularly for vulnerable rural populations. The case studies of Bulawayo, Beitbridge and Mashonaland Central exemplify the complex dynamics at play in rural master planning processes. While efforts are made to

engage stakeholders and align planning with national development agendas, concerns about land rights, unplanned development and accelerated timelines underscore the need for greater attention to equity, inclusivity and sustainability. In light of these findings, several recommendations are proposed to ensure that rural master planning initiatives in Zimbabwe foster inclusive and sustainable development:

- **Community-centred Planning:** Prioritise meaningful participation and collaboration with local communities throughout the planning process. Ensure that community voices are heard and their needs are integrated into planning decisions.
- **Equity and Social Justice:** Incorporate principles of equity and social justice into planning policies and interventions. Pay particular attention to the needs and rights of vulnerable rural populations, including women, youth and marginalised groups.
- **Strengthen Governance and Accountability:** Enhance transparency, accountability and good governance in rural master planning processes. Foster greater collaboration between local authorities, government agencies, civil society organisations and community representatives.
- **Sustainable Land Management:** Adopt sustainable land management practices to mitigate the risk of land dispossession and unplanned development. Ensure that land rights are protected and land-use decisions are guided by principles of environmental stewardship and community well-being.
- **Capacity-building and Training:** Invest in capacity-building and training for planners, policy-makers and community leaders involved in rural master planning. Equip stakeholders with the skills, knowledge and tools necessary to facilitate inclusive, participatory and evidence-based planning processes.
- **Policy Coherence and Integration:** Promote policy coherence and integration across sectors to address the multi-faceted challenges facing rural communities. Ensure that rural master planning aligns with broader national development strategies,

including poverty reduction, sustainable agriculture and rural infrastructure development.

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