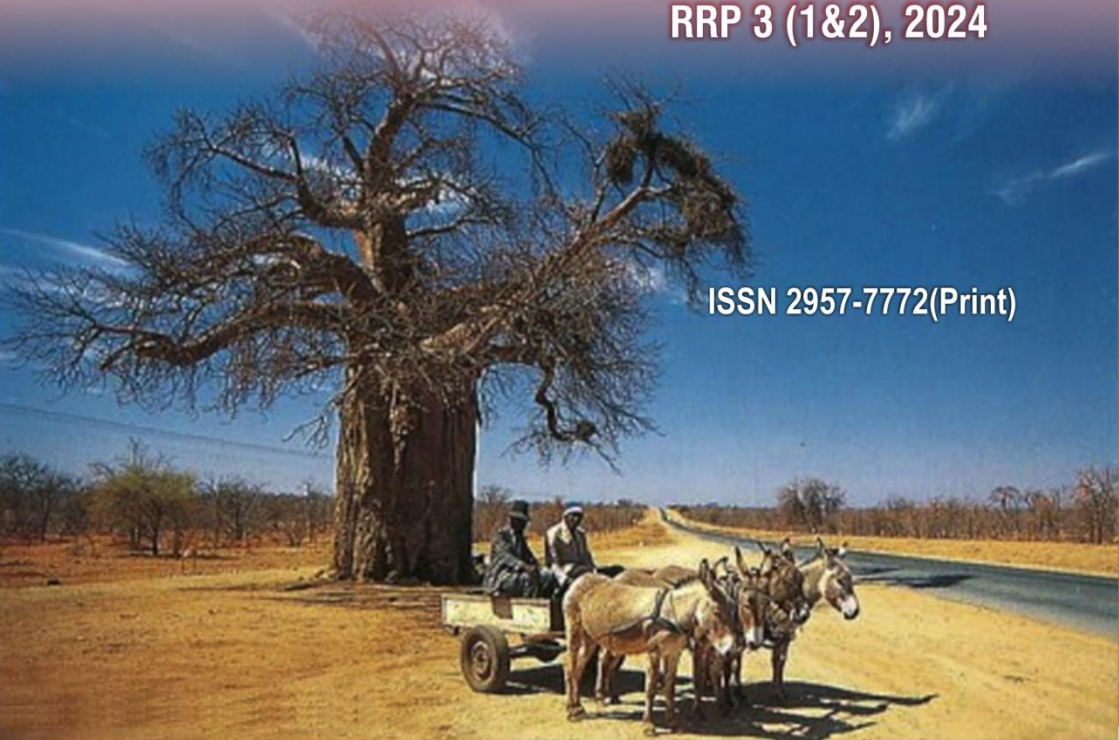




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About the Journal

JOURNAL PURPOSE

The purpose of the *Review of Rural Resilience Praxis* is to provide a forum for disaster risk mitigation, adaptation, and preparedness.

CONTRIBUTION AND READERSHIP

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Review of Rural Resilience Praxis

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SCOPE AND FOCUS

In as much as the urban economic trajectory is increasing by each day, the rural economy, especially in many developing countries, still comprises a great proportion of the extractive and accommodation industries. Retaining some spaces as rural areas remains critical given the integral role rural areas play in providing ecosystem services to both wildlife and humanity. In this light, rural resilience as practice beckons for critical studies especially in the face of the ever-threatening extreme weather events and climate change that then impact on the livelihoods and lifestyles of the rural communities. *Review of Rural Resilience Praxis* (RRRP) comes in as a platform for critical engagement by scholars, practitioners, and leaders as they seek to debate and proffer solutions to the rural sectors' sustainable growth trajectory, which is resilient to the vagaries of climate change. This journal is also aimed at championing the philosophy of the right to be rural. The issue of conviviality between the different constituencies of the sectors, compiled with the competing challenges of improving rural spaces while also making the conservation, and preservation debates matter is the hallmark of this platform of critical thinking and reflection. The journal is published bi-annually.

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Rural Towns in Zimbabwe: Urbanisation without Growth and Implications for Sustainability

NYASHA NDEMO¹, TINASHE MAGANDE² AND RUMBIDZAI MPAHLO³

Abstract

Many towns in sub-Saharan rural terrain are struggling with accelerated urbanisation because of the country's present economic downfall prompting an investigation of difficulties and sustainability implications associated with excessive and unsustainable urbanisation trajectories. It underscores that urbanisation without economic growth is the primary challenge in rural towns. To provide a thorough analysis, the study employed a mixed method approach in data collection. Quantitative data collection in this study encompasses the use of surveys and statistical analysis to measure changes in infrastructure, economic indicators, and demographic trends. Recommendations advocate integrated, context-specific development methods with a focus on community engagement, local economic promotion and infrastructure investment. Sustainable urban planning should be given top priority in policy interventions, considering social, economic and environmental factors. Collaboration between government, communities, and stakeholders is needed for effective implementation, fostering sustainable growth and improving well-being in rural Zimbabwean towns amid urbanisation challenges. The adaptation and resilience demonstrated by small rural towns in Zimbabwe suggest the possibility of sustainable development in rural places experiencing dynamic change, despite the obvious obstacles. For inclusive and sustainable growth, the study recommends that there should be improving infrastructure and service delivery in rural towns.

Keywords: *sub-Saharan African, Economic downfall, Urban dynamics, Rural-urban relationships, Infrastructure and Investment.*

INTRODUCTION

Africa has lately been characterised by high population growth rates and urbanisation with inadequate infrastructure in towns and cities, a feature that has exerted pressure on urban resources (Boadi *et al.*, 2005, Dos Santos *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, this threatens the health of urban residents and the

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sustainability of the growing urban areas, particularly the rural towns. Boadi *et al.*, 2005 further argue that 95% of the population in Africa were rural at the start of the 20th century. United Nations Environment Programme (1999) note that Africa was the least urbanised continent in the 1960s with only 18.8% residing in urban areas. This doubled by 1996 and in 2010, 43% was urbanised (United Nations Population Division, 1997). Castells-Quintana, *et al.* (2020). underscores that the highest rate of urbanisation without growth is taking place in sub-Saharan Africa. This has placed a great burden on governments to develop the African continent. This is particularly witnessed with the inadequacy in the provision of facilities needed by the residents, hence putting pressure on resources and the environment (*ibid.*). Manuh & Yemeru (2019) emphasised on inadequate housing infrastructure, as many town residents are living in crowded areas with poor sanitation that causes serious health threats. The growth of these informal settlements has been a result of the need to find employment (Corburn and Sverdlik, 2019). That has accelerated migration from rural set ups to towns and cities where industries are concentrated.

Most of the key activities of production, consumption, trade and commerce are concentrated in towns and cities, thereby drawing a lot of population to those spallialities. Major shifts in urbanisation are taking place in the global south, presenting socio-economic challenges to the developing world. This is exacerbated by high rates of poverty with evidence showing that the quality of life in some towns of these regions is much worse than in the rural areas (United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, 2001). Additionally, poor economic growth and performance in Africa has placed hindrance for the government to provide adequate infrastructure for the growing population. Local Agenda 21 has since been promoted from 1992 Earth Summit as a basic concept to push for sustainable urban development in Africa (Boadi *et al.*, 2005; Salvia *et al.*, 2021), but implementation has been slow to now existent in countries like Zimbabwe. The rural transformation in Zimbabwe started with the Land reform program in 2000 (Moyo, 2011; Scoones and Murimbarimba, 2021).

This article assumes the following structure; initially the introduction will provide a brief background and articulates the problem statement. Subsequently, the conceptual framework section will interpret key study-defining concepts. A comprehensive literature review follows, contextualising the issue within a broader framework, highlighting major debates and identifying gaps in scholarly discourse. The Research Methodology section follows, clarifying the rationale for utilising specific data sources. The

research findings are then methodically presented through illustrative case studies, offering grounded insights into the matter under analysis. A subsequent discussion section critically evaluates the convergence, divergence or fresh contributions of the study's theory and findings, while also exploring their implications on policy and practice. The conclusions section contextualises the primary aim of the article, and actionable recommendations are provided for relevant stakeholders. Notably, the article concludes with acknowledgements, expressing gratitude to those who contributed to the research.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This section presents the conceptual framework that underpins the study, emphasising on the interactions among the major factors like urbanisation, rural town dynamics, economic growth and sustainability. By defining the relationships and dependencies within this framework, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of their combined influence on the overarching research objectives.

SMALL RURAL TOWN

Within Zimbabwe's complex network of rural towns, a sizeable fraction are small and medium-sized cities a phenomenon that is observed worldwide, with over 60% of all urban people living in these types of places (UN-DESA, 2018). Zimbabwe and other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are characterised by the predominance of tiny urban centres. Approximately 196 million people, or over one-fifth of the total population, resided in small urban areas in Sub-Saharan Africa as of 2015 (Satterthwaite, 2016), which represents over half of the region's urban population. This categorisation has remarkable diversity since small towns can have anything from a few hundred to fifty thousand residents. Other classifications like the ones put forth by the UCLG (2017) place urban areas with 50,000 or fewer residents within the small town designation. These small towns are home to 26% of Africa's urban population, with differences between East and West Africa (both over 30%) and Central Africa (13%) (ibid.). Different national government definitions, however, present difficulties because the population criteria vary from a few hundred to 20,000 people (Agergaard *et al.*, 2019). A more functional viewpoint emerges as a helpful analytical lens given the variation in population thresholds. The roles of small towns can be defined as the services, facilities, and infrastructure they provide to their residents and the surrounding area. This method enables a more complex comprehension. Understanding the distinct characteristics and functions of small rural towns sets the stage for exploring their role in the broader urbanisation dynamics of Zimbabwe.

URBANISATION

Urbanisation, defined as the increase in the proportion of the population residing in urban areas, is a multifaceted phenomenon propelled by various factors (Agergaard *et al.*, 2019). In Zimbabwe, natural urban population growth, the reclassification of settlements as urban, and, most importantly, the movement of rural residents to cities and towns are all closely related to the process of urbanisation in rural towns (*ibid.*). In comparison to other countries, the United States has seen almost constant urbanisation over the past century. A crucial requirement for the definition of a territory as urban is that it must have at least 2,500 people; anything less than that is considered rural (Lichter *et al.*, 2021; Ratcliffe *et al.*, 2016). Rapid urbanisation in Africa is mostly caused by migration from rural to urban areas and natural population growth (Boadi *et al.*, 2005; Kundu & Pandey, 2020). This procedure is an essential part of structural transformation and the foundation of a nation's social and economic advancement. (Venables, 2018). Cities, as hubs of productivity and job creation, hold the promise of transformative development. However, the challenge lies in ensuring that urban areas keep pace with population growth, delivering both liveability and productivity (Venables, 2018). It is projected that by 2050, the number of people living in cities in developing countries, especially in Africa, will have tripled, adding 800 million more residents (Jedwab *et al.*, 2017). Though historically difficult, this urbanisation is considered necessary, with Africa needing to construct twice as much urban capital as it has historically accumulated. Africa is experiencing urbanisation at a unique rate, albeit at a somewhat lower income level than other regions. With a particular emphasis on natural population growth over rural-to-urban migration, urbanization has surpassed historical growth rates in Europe and Asia at comparable phases (Jedwab *et al.*, 2017).

ECONOMIC GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

While urbanisation is a hallmark of demographic shifts, the economic landscape in many African countries, including Zimbabwe, paints a grim picture, often characterised by challenges such as slum proliferation and an informal employment sector (Venables, 2018; UN-Habitat, 2016). The combination of urbanisation and industrialisation in Zimbabwe's rural towns presents both obstacles and potential for long-term, sustainable economic growth. More than 60% of urban dwellers live in slums across Africa are typified by one-story shacks arranged in town centres or extending beyond the boundaries of cities (Venables, 2018). This percentage rises to approximately 90% in nations like South Sudan and the Central African Republic (UN-Habitat, 2016). Up to 80% of urban labourers work outside of recognised or incorporated businesses in the informal sector, reflecting the informal nature

of housing and employment (Venables, 2018). A distinctive feature of the African economic landscape is described as 'urbanisation without industrialisation' (Gollin *et al.*, 2016). This idea emphasises how manufacturing production in African cities trails well behind cities in other regions at comparable development stages. The end effect is a distinct economic environment in which the manufacturing sector underperforms, and the urban population grows at an accelerated rate, creating a gap between urbanisation and industrialisation. The lack of infrastructure in Africa exacerbates the problems brought on by urbanisation and economic expansion. Significant infrastructure expenditures are required to support sustainable economic development (Foster *et al.*, 2010; Venables, 2018). Despite these obstacles, there is growing agreement that urbanisation and economic growth are positively correlated. This consensus serves as the foundation for the global development agenda, which includes the New Urban Agenda the 11th Sustainable Development Goal (United Nations (UN), 2015).

SUSTAINABILITY OF RURAL TOWNS

The importance of sustainability for small rural towns in Zimbabwe is paramount, urging policymakers to align urban wellbeing with judicious resource utilisation (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Rooted in the principles of sustainable development, the advocacy for increased human interactions across production, trade, commerce, and socio-cultural adaptations becomes pivotal for the longevity and resilience of these towns (Boadi *et al.*, 2005). Comprising environmental, economic, and social dimensions, sustainability stands on three pillars, each influencing the trajectory of these evolving communities (Hansmann *et al.*, 2012). The interplay between educated and uneducated inhabitants shapes the social fabric, influencing the town's vitality (Hansmann *et al.*, 2012). Economic considerations are equally critical, with unemployment rates and job distribution emerging as central challenges. Identifying small towns with the highest unemployment rates and addressing the spatial disconnect between job opportunities and town locations is key for economic sustainability (*ibid.*).

Demographic dynamics, encompassing natural development and migration patterns, further impact the sustainability landscape. The sub-urbanisation of small towns, attracting young families of reproductive age, initiates in-migration, followed by a natural population increase. Conversely, the out-migration of educated youth seeking prestigious employment in more significant regional centres can lead to a natural decrease. The demographic sustainability of small towns is involvedly linked to their distance from key regional centres, influencing whether they experience stagnation, growth, or

population decline (Hansmann *et al.*, 2012). Despite their central role in population distribution and development, there is a notable gap in understanding the significance of small towns for fostering smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth (Servillo *et al.*, 2014).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on small towns has commented on various perspectives and neglected the context of rural towns. Some focus on spatial relations playing a central role in key economic transformations of small towns (Dorosh and Thurlow, 2013). Such transformation includes infrastructure investment that encourages backwards and forward linkages and entanglements between agriculture and industrial activities. Picard *et al.* (2017) note that this creates growth poles. Chome *et al.* (2020) emphasise on corridors and Hinderink and Titus (1988) nodes of economic activity. Berdegúe and Proctor (2015) postulate that the growth of rural towns promotes the growth of value chains that adds value to agricultural production at the local and regional levels. More emphasis is placed on supply chains, transport networks, processing facilities and connections to retail outlets (Scoones and Murambinda, 2021).

Alonso (1973) and Meijers and Burger (2010) have identified two distinct categories of small towns that are particularly significant for the advancement of sustainability potential within the European urban system: towns situated close to larger cities, which are susceptible to the "borrowing-size" effect and should be analysed independently; and towns integrated into specialized agricultural areas, whose interaction with neighbour ring rural settlements is bidirectional. These are referred to as rural towns in Europe (Servillo *et al.*, 2014). In the Netherlands (van Leeuwen, 2010) and Poland (Stanny, 2010), these towns are still heavily dependent on the agriculture and agricultural processing industries. In Spain (Santamaria, 2000), these towns also serve as service providers for the surrounding area. In Romania, the urban functions of small towns, rapid industrialization, accompanied by the modernization of public infrastructure in the socialist period (1950-1989); small towns came into the focus of this policy in the 1980s, when the idea of coordinating strong "rural towns" was dominant (Benedek, 2006).

Many have commented on the importance of multi-location and multi-activity households, as people within a household take on different roles on- and off-farm (Steel *et al.*, 2019). Major debates on urbanisation have concentrated on gendered and generational dynamics, with women and younger people engaging in trading and new businesses (Agergaard *et al.*, 2019; Tacoli and Agergaard, 2017). A lot of people have been moving from rural set ups to

settle in towns with income-earning activity spread across sites is common (Ingelaere *et al.*, 2017). Such movements to towns embedded in rural areas have given rise to debates on informal settlements and urban informality (Kamete, 2020), expansion of peri-urban areas raising issues of food security and poverty reduction (Djurfeldt, 2015). Haggblade *et al.* (2007) emphasise on employment creation and poverty issues highlighting that some people in rural towns can maximise on new market linkages and business opportunities. This happens through combining increasingly commercialised agricultural production with off-farm income earnings. However, this creates vicious circles of poverty for others who cannot maximise on this (*ibid.*).

Major debates have also emerged into being in the political realm, prompted by decentralisation policies, for example, or emerging because of the role of business elites in small towns linked to rural areas (Owusu, 2013; Vincent, 1974). The decentralisation policy has also been introduced in Zimbabwe. Strong foundations exist for Zimbabwe's devolution plan, which may be built upon. The country has been working toward decentralisation of services to small towns since 1883 (Dube and Chigumira, 2020). The nation's devolutionary plan is outlined in the National Development Strategy¹, the Fiscal Policy, and the Presidential Policy Guidelines on Devolution. However, changing the political relations between the central government and the local government through decentralisation also raises questions on the governance of small towns as new power dynamics emerge (Satterthwaite and Tacoli, 2003).

The discussion is incomplete if we conclude without mentioning global debates on sustainability issues. The sustainability of small rural towns in the Zimbabwean case is confronted by a lot of challenges, reflecting broader global patterns. High unemployment rates, attributed to industrial restructuring, emerge as a significant threat to the economic sustainability of these towns (Birtel and Turnock, 2007). This is compounded by urban poverty, exemplified by findings in Romania, where 44% of the poorest households are concentrated in small towns (Voicu, 2005). The lack of utilities and urban infrastructure further compounds the predicament, with some towns lacking such amenities entirely, while others have seen existing infrastructure deteriorate due to insufficient investment (Bănică *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, out-migration exacerbates the strain on these towns, a common phenomenon in economically disadvantaged regions, leading residents to relocate either to traditional rural areas or seek opportunities in foreign countries (Ianoş, 2000; Sandu, 2005).

Historically, the urbanisation process involves both the concentration of population around principal cities and the outward expansion into rural areas and small towns (Fossett & Crowell, 2019). Small towns and rural areas, often overlooked, undergo spatial redefinition as they integrate into the metropolitan region's social fabric and economic life (Lichter *et al.*, 2021; Cromartie, 2006). The demographic shifts in rural and small-town populations are integral dimensions of the broader urbanisation process, highlighting the interconnectedness of urban and rural dynamics. As rural areas experience demographic shifts and spatial reconfigurations, the economic landscape undergoes transformations that call for a closer examination of the relationship between urbanisation and economic growth.

Much research on urban environments in Zimbabwe concentrate on cities and large towns (Mbiba, 2017; Potts and Mutambirwa, 1990). It highlights various aspects of urban life, such as the role of urban informality (Kamete, 2020), the imposition of planning regulations (Vambe, 2008), and the livelihoods of workers (Mupedziswa and Gumbo, 2001). McGregor and Chatiza (2019) and Muchadenyika (2015) highlights the significance of party politics in the Zimbabwean urban context. The idea of establishing rural towns came with the 1982 Transitional Development Plan that supported of the need for investment in rural service centers (GoZ, 1982). The intention was to bring the rural population into close touch with markets and services to create connections with the national economy, local marketplaces with regional specialisations, and a lot of unofficial job prospects (*ibid.*).

It was insufficient to invest in infrastructure and services in the setting of an uneven economy with an ethnically defined and spatially confined populace. Growth centres during the post-colonial era included mining towns, estate towns and white farming towns; all of these had to be taken into account in the post-independence investment plan (Scoones and Murambinda, 2021). The dualistic pattern of economic development persisted in the absence of major land reform, and they were not always incorporated into local economies. Some thrived for example, Gokwe because of the cotton boom, Murewa because of horticulture marketing to Harare, but several stayed mostly in the designers' dreams rather than becoming reality (Wekwete. 1988). Except for a few notable ones (Andersson, 2002; Kamete, 1998; Pedersen, 1992), small rural towns have not been extensively discussed in the literature on Zimbabwe.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is grounded in the interpretivist research paradigm, which emphasises the significance of exploring and understanding the complex processes of urbanisation in Zimbabwean rural towns undergoing change without simultaneous growth. This philosophical position permits a qualitative investigation, allowing for a more complex comprehension of the various elements affecting the progress of urbanisation. By using interpretivism, the study aims to clarify the fundamental dynamics of the urban landscape and to untangle the intricacies present in these phenomena.

In terms of research design, a mixed-methods approach is embraced to ensure a comprehensive analysis of urbanisation dynamics. This involves integrating qualitative and quantitative techniques to capture both depth and breadth of insights. Qualitative components encompass case studies, on-the-ground observations, and interviews, providing a contextual understanding. On the other hand, quantitative aspects involve the utilisation of data extracted from diverse sources such as academic journals, books, government documents, and policy papers. This triangulation of methods ensures a well-rounded exploration of the urbanisation process in Zimbabwean rural towns. The research methodology is distinguished by a deductive orientation, which starts the investigation with theoretical and empirical data from scholarly publications and official government records. It is possible to formulate hypotheses thanks to this deductive basis. But the study also includes an inductive component, which is especially clear in the case studies, where observations and interviews conducted on the ground help to produce fresh ideas and viewpoints.

FINDINGS

An analysis of Zimbabwe's small rural towns reveals a critical story of urbanisation devoid of traditional growth trajectories. These little rural communities' transformational journey highlights how flexible they are in the face of rapid economic change. Originally serving as support bases for large-scale commercial farmers, these towns have evolved into hubs for A1 and A2 farmers, demonstrating their ability to adjust to changing economic models. The durability of these communities is demonstrated by the observed economic diversification, which is indicated by the establishment of many industries and firms. But issues like poor service, unethical behaviour, and changes in the cotton sector highlight the precarious balance they have to maintain. On the other hand, issues like poor service delivery, unethical behaviour, and changes in the cotton sector highlight the precarious balance they uphold to support economic expansion. Land reform has had significant

socioeconomic effects, particularly after the United States (US) dollar was adopted in 2009. The economic landscapes and social structures of the towns were drastically transformed by this policy change, which also led to a building boom, the expansion of medical facilities, and the attraction of businesses.

One important aspect of these cities is the importance of local entrepreneurship, which is frequently based in the families of land reform farmers (Scoones and Murimbarimba, 2021). In addition to providing for livelihoods, the booming informal sector serves as an example of how well-adapted the communities are to deal with and benefit from economic uncertainty. The difficulties in supplying basic services, cases of land sales corruption, and susceptibility to soil gully formations highlight the difficulties in developing infrastructure. For these communities to develop sustainably, it becomes vital to strike a balance between prospects for expansion and the need to address these issues. A major theme that touches on social, economic, and environmental aspects is sustainability. The towns have to deal with socioeconomic inequalities, maintain the general well-being of their citizens, and strike a careful balance between environmental preservation and economic growth. Strategic infrastructure investments, careful policy considerations, and sophisticated urban planning are all necessary to achieve sustainable growth.

CASE STUDIES

MVURWI - NAVIGATING URBANISATION, ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION, AND SUSTAINABILITY

Mvurwi, a town situated in Mashonaland Central Province, Zimbabwe, has experienced significant transformation because of the dynamics of rural-urbanisation, especially in the years after the tobacco boom. It was originally built as a residential hub for farmworkers and an essential service centre for large-scale white commercial farmers. The way the town has changed over time reflects how land reform has changed society and how the agricultural economy has changed as a result.

Prior to land reform, large-scale farms were served by commercial banks and tractor rental companies, and farm suppliers catered mostly to white commercial farmers in Mvurwi's central business district. Historically a centre of government, the town saw an increase in state presence during land reform, which resulted in the opening of new government offices and a hiring boom. Following land reform, the agricultural sector experienced profound

transformation, mostly driven by the earnings from tobacco grown by A1 and A2 farmers. In contrast to previous times, when wealth was vested in a few numbers of white commercial farmers. The US dollar's adoption in 2009 encouraged the growth of tobacco production, drastically altering Mvurwi's economic terrain. The town became a beneficiary of these profits, experiencing unprecedented growth marked by a building boom, expansion of medical facilities, and the establishment of new schools.

That expansion, nevertheless, has not come without difficulties for Mvurwi. Even though the town council assigned new stands in high- and medium-density zones, it took longer to provide basic utilities like sewerage and electricity. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the town has grown to be a popular place for farmers to invest, which has led to an increase in the local population. Scoones and Murimbarimba's (2021) survey argues that 16% of A1 smallholder farmers have made rental income-generating investments in town buildings following land reform. More jobs in a variety of industries, including construction, welding, hardware store ownership, brick moulding, sawmill operations, and transportation, have become available because of the building projects.

In Mvurwi, the closure of companies that supported large-scale commercial farming led to a move toward small- and medium-scale farming, economic diversification is visible. To accommodate the expanding population, the town saw a substantial development of butchers, taverns, and bottle stores. Mobile phone credit sales, eco-cash transfers, and currency exchange all saw significant increases in growth. Local entrepreneurship is essential to the growth of new companies, especially when it comes from the families of land reform farmers. Numerous livelihoods in the community are supported by the thriving informal sector. Notably, as more farmers invest in automobiles for the transportation of people and commodities, the transportation industry has grown to be a major role, in connecting farmers to the town.

The importance of Mvurwi's urban land for housing has given rise to difficulties, such as dishonest tactics by local politicians in the plot sales. Small towns like Mvurwi profit from the local economy's continued localisation despite these problems. The complicated dynamics of rural communities in Zimbabwe experiencing urbanisation without following traditional patterns of economic growth are best illustrated by the case of Mvurwi. The tobacco boom and land reform have had a profound impact on the town's economy, bringing with them both opportunities and challenges.

For Mvurwi to continue growing and prospering as it navigates this dynamic change, it will be essential to address concerns related to service delivery, sustainability, and minimising corrupt practices.

GOKWE: RURAL URBANISATION, DEVELOPMENT, AND SUSTAINING LIVELIHOODS

Gokwe is a rural town in Zimbabwe's Midlands province, offers a unique example of urbanisation influenced by the Growth Point policy implemented by the government. Gokwe has developed into a town, despite early impressions of being backward, illustrating the difficulties and achievements involved in this change. Gokwe was once a government station that housed essential services like the police, district commissioner, hospital, and veterinary clinic. The government's growth points program expedited the town's development, leading to its official town status in July 2006, when it was placed under the Gokwe South Rural District Council's jurisdiction (Urban Councils Association of Zimbabwe, 2006).

The Gokwe Town Council has made significant infrastructural investments, building a \$300 000 administration building and tackling waste collection by working with non-profits (The Sunday News, July 19, 2015). The town has different industrial landscape, with large banks and traditional industrial groups co-existing with small-scale formal and informal enterprises. With four primary and four secondary schools serving a population estimated to be below 30 000, Gokwe has achieved progress in education (Masiwa, 2015). In 2015, the town embarked on a major streetlight renovation program and built a new primary school, Town House, as part of its attempts to solve infrastructure concerns. Healthcare services are provided by several public and private clinics in addition to the Gokwe South Hospital.

To supply water to the town, Gokwe is dependent on nine to eleven boreholes. Water supply is guaranteed by a sizable reservoir tank with a capacity of 5000 m³, and continuous efforts under the small towns Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) program seek to renovate the water and sewage systems. A school and stadium are being built by the council to improve recreational opportunities. Gokwe's economy is broad, encompassing both huge enterprises like Cottco and an abattoir and small-scale business owners. Major stores and nightclubs are located in the town, which boosts its economy. Economic obstacles are presented by issues like gully formations and the general shift in attention away from agriculture, especially the cotton business. Gokwe has large coal reserves in the Semwa mine, which offers a chance for

regional growth and the generation of power for the benefit of the entire country. The town also boasts the Chirisa Game Park, a significant wildlife reserve contributing to tourism.

Gokwe's soil gully formation susceptibility is one of the main issues hindering infrastructure development. The town's traditional reliance on agriculture, especially the cotton industry, has suffered because of declining prices, which has affected the ability of the local government to provide services. The transition of Gokwe from a government station to a proclaimed town illustrates the challenges associated with Zimbabwe's rural urbanisation. Gokwe serves as a case study demonstrating the nature of urbanisation without traditional growth patterns as it overcomes obstacles and seizes possibilities. The town's adaptability and range of activities highlight the possibility for sustainable development in rural places going through change.

DISCUSSION

The results of the investigation into Mvurwi and Gokwe, when placed in the larger context of Zimbabwe's rural towns, stimulate a conversation about the urbanisation, economic development, and sustainability. Understanding the opportunities and challenges small cities face is enhanced by the literature's discussion of the junction of local realities and global debates. The literature emphasises growth poles, corridors, and centers of economic activity to highlight the significance of spatial relations in significant economic shifts. These ideas are supported by the experiences of Mvurwi and Gokwe, which demonstrate how economic diversification and infrastructure development may result in thriving hubs with connections between industry and agriculture that flow both ways. Economic diversification in Mvurwi, where agricultural earnings fuelled expansion in other industries, is consistent with the idea that household livelihoods go beyond farming. This engagement helps to create new market connections and jobs.

Zimbabwe's implementation of decentralisation strategies is in line with international discussions about the function of small towns connected to rural areas. Although the devolution plan has its roots in the history of the nation dating back to 1883, it also presents some intriguing governance dynamics issues. The difficulty is striking a balance between local autonomy and efficient governing institutions when new power relations appear. The sustainability issues that Zimbabwe's small rural towns face is a reflection of larger global trends. Inadequate infrastructure, high unemployment rates, and urban poverty are prevalent themes. Lessons learned from Romania's experience and the effects of out-migration highlight the necessity of

comprehensive, long-term development plans that take into account social, cultural and infrastructure aspects. The body of research highlights how crucial land reform was in determining small towns' economic futures. The stories of Mvurwi and Gokwe, impacted by the tobacco industry and connected to the cotton boom respectively, highlight the crucial relationship between agricultural policies and the success of small rural communities. This link emphasises how important it is to have flexible plans when dealing with changing economic conditions. There are clear gaps in the literature that highlights the necessity for more thorough discourse on small towns given how important they are to the socioeconomic fabric.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By examining small rural towns in Zimbabwe as a whole, this study sheds light on the relationships and developmental linkages between urbanisation, economic development, and sustainability. These towns' experiences reflect both general trends and particular regional difficulties. The relationship among agricultural policies, land reform, and economic diversification becomes apparent as a crucial factor in determining the prosperity of small rural towns. The historical legacies of dualistic economic growth highlight the necessity of customised approaches that take into account the unique qualities and opportunities of every community. The adaptation and resilience demonstrated by small rural towns in Zimbabwe suggest the possibility of sustainable development in rural places experiencing dynamic change, despite the obvious obstacles. To realise this potential, there is need close the gaps in service delivery, stimulate inclusive growth, and curtail corrupt behaviour. There is also need to create an atmosphere that supports community well-being and economic vibrancy. For inclusive and sustainable growth the following recommendations are offered:

- *Improving Infrastructure and Service Delivery:* Addressing the current gaps in basic infrastructure and service supply is imperative if small rural communities are to remain sustainable. To facilitate a more rapid rate of urbanization, efforts should be undertaken to hasten the provision of amenities like power and sewerage. Investments in infrastructure should be in line with the changing economic environment to make sure that these communities' expansion is backed by stable infrastructure.
- *Community-Centred Economic Development:* Community-centric strategies are essential for promoting equitable economic growth in small rural towns. It is important to support local business, especially those that come from the families of those who have benefited from land reform. This means providing targeted assistance to a range of businesses that have been shown to be essential to the local economy, such as mobile

services, bars, and butchers. Furthermore, methods for utilising the informal sector's potential should be developed, acknowledging its significance in maintaining livelihoods in these regions.

- *Governance Reforms and Policy Adaptation*: Zimbabwe's National Development Strategy 1's effective decentralization strategy should be supported by governance reforms that provide local administrations more authority. Maintaining small rural communities requires finding a balance between strong governance systems and local autonomy. Recognising the interactions between national laws and local realities, policymakers should modify their approaches to the changing requirements and difficulties faced by small towns. Moreover, considering the various paths taken by various towns in Zimbabwe, an appropriate approach to land reform, agricultural policies, and economic diversification should be undertaken.

Achieving sustainable small rural towns in Zimbabwe will require an adaptive, all-encompassing strategy that considers social, economic, and environmental factors. Zimbabwe's small rural towns may realise their potential as dynamic, resilient, and sustainable centres of development by navigating the challenges of urbanisation by putting community wellbeing first, promoting economic variety, and improving governance systems.

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