

Debunking the Rural-Urban Dichotomy: Framework towards a Single Legislation that Enables Integration of Rural and Urban Local Authorities in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The governance landscape in Zimbabwe is beset by profound issues of rapidly growing urbanisation and peri-urban growth that blur traditional rural-urban boundaries and expose the shortcomings of separate legislative frameworks such as the Rural District Councils Act and Urban Councils Act. Although the current dual systems boast of administrative efficiencies, they are increasingly failing to meet the hybrid settlements where agricultural livelihoods are intertwined with urban pressures to create fragmented service delivery, land tenure conflicts and institutional overlaps as witnessed in areas such as Epworth and hinterlands of Harare. Based on the analysis of the text in scholarly references, case studies, policy frameworks, this research identifies three key findings. First, peri-urban areas cannot be categorised as either rural or urban areas, but rather lie at a continuum between rural and urban areas that require integrated planning approaches. Second, fragmentation of governance through dichotomous laws contributes to inefficiencies in infrastructure, food systems, climate mitigation capabilities. Third, theories of multi-level cooperation highlight that unified structures can be used to develop synergies across jurisdictions. This analysis exposes that entrenched divisions reinforce inequalities and impede adaptive development that is consistent with the global discontent over outmoded dichotomies.

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The results indicate that the adoption of a single legal framework, including legal integration, institutional harmonisation, spatial planning and socio-economic alignment, would allow coherent management of emerging spatial realities, encouraging the delivery of services equitably and the sustainable urbanisation. The study recommends that policymakers should consider adopting a single Local Government Act that amalgamates rural and urban authorities with flexible classifications based on the properties of functional continuum to eliminate the jurisdictional overlaps and to have a single planning of the peri-urban areas.

Keywords: rural-urban continuum, peri-urban governance, legislative integration, multi-level governance, spatial planning, Zimbabwe local authorities

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The traditional rural-urban dichotomy, deeply rooted in the system of Zimbabwean governance, is turning more and more into an anachronic relic since the rapid urbanisation process and the growth of peri-urban settlements that erase the previously very clear lines between rural and urban space, are taking their toll. Conventionally, the separation of governance is codified under different statutes. The Rural District Councils Act regulates the rural local authorities and the Urban Councils Act regulate urban councils. This binary distinction is, however, threatened on the ground where peri-urban spaces are displayed to possess characteristics which are neither rural nor urban. These places work within a continuum and have both agricultural and urban livelihood systems, complex systems of governance and mixed settlement patterns. This type of hybridity demands an integrated approach to governance as Johnson and Scala (2022) critique the over-simplification that the traditional dichotomy assumes. The limiting compartmentalisation of the current separate legislative codes means that it generates limited governance which restricts

quality administration of the changing peri-urban realities and constrains interventions tailored to the socio-economic nuances of these areas (Trefon, 2009; Bhanye *et al.*, 2023).

Empirical studies in the peri-urban setting of Zimbabwe explain epiphanies of the governing and institutional problems that continue to exist due to the prevailing dichotomy. As an example, the peri-urban settlements like Caledonia show the contest over access and tenure of land complicated by the overlapping jurisdictional claims by both rural and urban authorities and the purchase and sale of land influenced by the elite actors. This intricate dynamic creates a fragmented governance structure, legal ambivalence and social tensions between the settlers who are trying to assert their land rights and manoeuvre between competing claims (Bhanye *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, the study of urban food systems proves that the current fragmented structure of the legislation system limits the possibilities of coordinated planning and adversely affects the possibility of responding to challenges such as the vulnerability of the city to climate change, urban poverty and deficit of infrastructures in the city, such as Bulawayo. In the given instance, there are institutional arrangements at national level that are not linked to local climate-sensitive agriculture practices and urban governance that show the pitfalls of unequal treatment of the rural and urban systems during their functional integration (Maphosa and Moyo, 2024; Matooane *et al.*, 2025). This type of evidence underlines the role that the rigidity of governance plays in preventing the comprehensive interventions required to have a sustainable peri-urban development.

To these multilayered challenges, there is an emergent consensus to have a single legislative framework that dissolves the arbitrary rural-urban divide and promotes integrated governance that is responsive to the changing urban-rural

continuum in Zimbabwe. This would allow consistent management of land tenure, delivery of services, infrastructure and environmental sustainability across hybrid settlements and unlock synergies between rural and urban administrations that are currently suppressed by the law (Trefon, 2009; Kokx and Kempen, 2010; Meriggi *et al.*, 2023). The single-legislation approach will help to make it more inclusive by acknowledging the socio-economic realities on the ground, stream consolidations of institutional roles and improve the cooperation between stakeholders. The experience of peri-urban governance in other countries confirms that integrated systems are crucial to overcoming the processes of fragmented authority and supporting the process of sustainable urbanisation (Nuhu, 2018; Chen *et al.*, 2021). Such an integrated framework of legislation would see Zimbabwe local governance architecture adaptive, fair and more able to cope with the intricacies of contemporary spatial development and of social-political dynamics.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The Rural Urban Continuum Theory, developed by Sorokin and Zimmerman (1929) challenges the traditional dichotomous classification of rural and urban spaces and posits that rural and urban spaces do exist along a continuous gradient as opposed to existing as isolated and static entities. This continuum view would not differentiate between countryside and urban areas, instead emphasising gradual decline of rural areas and growth of urban areas in different ways. Studies of metropolitan peripheries define the two terms as exurbs and peri-urban areas which are both between spaces where rural and urban characteristics merge, challenging the inflexible administrative typologies (Chagomoka *et al.*, 2018; Golding and Winkler, 2020). Socio-spatial analyses along the urban-rural gradient indicate that the interaction of natural amenities, agriculture and food security along the urban-rural gradient,

shapes human settlement and economic activities in subtle ways (Chagomoka *et al.*, 2018). Using this lens to analyse the governance of Zimbabwe, the inflexible legal distinction between rural and urban local authorities seems dated and unnatural as it overlooks the dynamic and fluid nature of the process of urbanisation and rural development. This theoretical framework highlights the need to have legal reforms aimed at aligning local authorities with the realities of the continuum; the continuum of empirical realities and functional interdependencies (Cattaneo *et al.*, 2021; Ye *et al.*, 2022).

Added to rural-urban continuum, Multi-Level Governance (MLG) and Inter-Municipal Cooperation Theories highlight that coordination and collaboration at various levels of government and between adjacent jurisdictions is highly important, especially between rural and urban municipalities. Empirical studies have shown that a lack of strong inter-jurisdictional collaboration undermines the effectiveness of governance and the outcomes of cost reduction and service delivery optimisation of the provision of public services (Bel and Warner, 2015; Bel and Sebő, 2019; Hickey *et al.*, 2021; Elston, Bel and Wang, 2023). MLG frameworks encourage the vertical and horizontal integration of subnational actors, making it possible to make joint decisions and align policies with functional territories, instead of administrative boundaries (Kern and Bulkeley, 2009; Gänzle, 2016; Del Canto Viterale, 2024; Prianto *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, those issues of fragmented governance that these theories have shed some light on are mirrored by the necessity of Zimbabwe adopting a single-legislative framework that will allow coordination of institutional activities of both rural and urban local authorities of Zimbabwe and will enable the development of an integrated spatial planning and service delivery. The studies prove this approach further as the mechanism of territorial spatial governance encourages the complementary urban-rural functionality in the form of land

use, resource allocation and collaboration between stakeholders (Kokx and Kempen, 2010; Tan *et al.*, 2024). Thus, adopting these theoretical underpinnings can offer a solid argument to support the changes in legislation that are set to dissolve the false rural-urban boundary and promote collaborative governance models in Zimbabwe.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review explores the ways in which the rural-urban divide is created and contested by governance studies and how integration frameworks can inform unified laws to be applied by local governments, especially in Zimbabwe.

THE PERSISTENCE OF THE RURAL-URBAN DICHOTOMY

The perception of rural and urban as two different and separate systems is a very disputable one, supported by academic evidence. Instead, the two have a gradual graduality to each other in spatial and socio-economic realities, more commonly referred to as the rural-urban continuum. The existence of peri-urban areas, growth points and rural service centres which are both rural and urban in nature, are reflected in this continuum. As practice in Europe and Africa shows, it is not sufficient to use fixed classifications to reflect their dynamism when it comes to settlement patterns and economic activities (Corker, 2016; Cattivelli, 2021). Besides, this dichotomy can be reproduced resulting in the ineffectiveness of the administration and social and institutional divisions. Research shows that these differences are more likely to be symbolic and political, impacting how stakeholders interact and see each other which, in some instances, leads to fragmentation and less cooperation (De Olde and Oosterlynck, 2021).

The continued existence of the rural-urban dichotomy is deeply rooted in most systems of governance and supports historical and structural inequalities. This split is regularly based on the

antique socio-political stances that view rural and urban locations as distinct and separate entities in terms of developmental paths and administrative requirements. Research on China demonstrates how the ancient urban-rural relations have been lost and, thus fragmented models of governance perpetuate the inequality and inefficiency (Wong *et al.*, 2020). Equally, in Zimbabwe, the dualistic system between rural and urban councils is indicative of these deeply-rooted divisions which fail to explain social, economic and spatial interdependencies (Muchadenyika, 2015; Mercandalli *et al.*, 2023). Such bifurcation often ignores subtle realities such as the peri-urbanisation processes and socio-economic exchange across traditional boundaries that lead to both rural and urban societies facing challenges in governance that reflect the systemic fragmentation (Bhanye *et al.*, 2024).

In addition, administrative boundaries in Zimbabwe and other similar situations usually do not reflect real socio-economic interconnections and spatial continuum, making it difficult to allocate resources and implement policies. The division of local authorities by artificial rural-urban division adds to the inefficiencies by creating parallel bureaucratic structures, hindering integrated planning and development (Olde and Oosterlynck, 2021). One such mismatch is the case of peri-urban areas which are caught between the rural-urban interface and suffers because of distorted land markets and informal settlements because of conflicting jurisdictional controls (Bhanye *et al.*, 2024). These dysfunctional boundaries fail to recognise the reality of mobility, economic interdependence, mutual vulnerabilities such as climate change that affects both rural and urban populations but remains compartmentalised in the governance structures (Mugambiwa and Rukema, 2019; Chirisa *et al.*, 2021).

The implications of high rural-urban governance dualism that continues in Zimbabwe are grave and will continue to bring about inequalities and poor service delivery. The inefficiency of this segment of segregated society is reflected in health, infrastructures and financial inclusion differences between rural and urban populations (Huang and Zhang, 2020; Svtwa *et al.*, 2023). Rural populations are usually marginalised and under-served, with the rural issues they face, including limited access to digital financial services and essential health interventions, compared to their urban counterparts who somewhat adjust better to these challenges (Maita *et al.*, 2024; Bekele *et al.*, 2025). Moreover, the governance systems that are built on dichotomous systems find it difficult to engage communities in a holistic manner that supports climate adaptation and rural development funding which are essential to build inclusive resilience (Muposhi *et al.*, 2016; Chirisa *et al.*, 2021). Such dimensions reflect an urgent necessity of reforms to a unified legislative framework in Zimbabwe that breaks down the artificial rural-urban divisions and encourages integrated and equitable governance across all the local authorities.

GOVERNANCE, SERVICE DELIVERY AND INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

Local authorities in Zimbabwe continue to face challenges of pervasive failures that undermine service delivery which includes corruption, weak accountability mechanisms and political interference. The quality of key services experienced by urban councils, including waste management, water supply and healthcare, has been on a downward trend, despite their constitutional protection granted in 2013 (Marumahoko *et al.*, 2020). The waning is exacerbated by the policies of the national government that inhibit the autonomy and capacity of the localities, restraining the responsiveness of the municipalities and their effectiveness in their work (*ibid.*). Further hampering service delivery are corruption and procurement inefficiencies

which have been documented to challenge the processes of advertising, bid evaluation and contract management of the public procurement process in the Zimbabwean public sector (Dzuke and Naude, 2017). These poor governance practices are exhibited in both rural and urban local authorities and are systemic institutional weaknesses that legislation has failed to fully correct. Therefore, governance quality, such as transparency, accountability and political interference, needs to be addressed when it comes to the enhancement of municipal service outcomes. Inter-municipal cooperation and collaboration have been found to be effective channels to improve governance and efficiency in service delivery, but they need a strong institutional design and capacity. Studies indicate that coordinated action between rural and urban councils can result in better use of resources, reduction of costs and more consistent policy implementation, but coordination remains weak because of the fragmented governance system and lack of frameworks that would enable the coordination (Bel and Warner, 2015; Bel and Sebő, 2019). Some of the challenges that affect rural district councils (RDCs) in Zimbabwe include lack of sufficient financial and human resources, unstable political situations and incomplete decentralisation which impedes their effectiveness in organising and establishing community resilience (Manyena, 2006; Mupedzi *et al.*, 2023). Besides, the politics of interference also affect land access and planning of urban infrastructure which further complicates the dynamics of politics within the local authorities (Muchadenyika, 2015; Bhanye *et al.*, 2023). Institutional reforms that can strengthen the governance structures, clarification of roles and integration of development across the municipalities are, therefore, a necessity towards improved service delivery and integrated development.

The implication on Zimbabwe is that legislative reforms purely based on structural integration of rural and urban local

authorities, will not be adequate unless they are accompanied by reforms in the quality of governance and institutional capacity. A transparent, accountable and politically insulated governance system, supported by participatory practices and sufficient resource allocations, is a key to effective service delivery (Dzuke and Naude, 2017; Marumahoko *et al.*, 2020). Opportunities to increase adaptive capacity and local ownership of development initiatives (especially in rural areas) can be achieved through the use of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) and community participation in governance (Mugambiwa and Makhubele, 2021). The capacity development, fiscal decentralisation and better coordination among the levels of government, are some of the aspects of institutional capacity-building needed to ensure that the unified legislative framework succeeds (Manyena, 2006; Vince *et al.*, 2024). This means that policy reforms should be at a structural and qualitative front of governance to achieve the full potential of integrated local authority administration in Zimbabwe.

The presence of rural and urban local authorities, which have different laws, creates inconsistencies in planning, service delivery and development of infrastructure. The parallel systems tend to be typified by the duplication of functions, unequal distribution of resources and priorities of development. Even in the high urbanising centres, the rural jurisdiction may not be in a position to respond to urban like issues such as housing, transport and service delivery because of institutional and legal constraints. Studies on decentralisation and local governments suggest that decentralised systems are a detriment to the coordination and effectiveness of the provision of public services. Conversely, integrated governance structures lead to efficiency as they balance the responsibilities and enable the allocation of resources in a more efficient manner (Drobnjaković and Panić, 2024). Furthermore, decentralised systems are the most effective when local authorities are empowered in a single

system that takes into account really spatial and socio-economic situations (Ain *et al.*, 2024).

URBAN-RURAL INTEGRATION AND SPATIAL PLANNING

More realistically, there should be one set of legislative procedures to be applied to all local authorities to respond to the changing settlement patterns in Zimbabwe. This would do away with the artificial separations and create a more inclusive and coherent system of government. It would also be helpful in harmonising the process of planning, ensuring that the infrastructure development, land-use management and service delivery are harmonised across all the area. The global experience of governance reforms shows that integrated systems can enhance policy coherence and reduce an institutional conflict (Ahani and Dadashpoor, 2021). Where the rural and the urban in the peri-urban areas interact in a dynamic and flexible way, a single governance structure can facilitate more flexible and responsive decision-making (Aguilar *et al.*, 2022; Geyer, 2024). It also helps in breaking down institutional hierarchies and perceptions that put urban authorities over rural ones and helps to create a more collaborative working environment. It is interesting to note that a single system would like to appreciate the fact that most of the so-called rural areas, including growth points and service centres, already have urban functions, where the demand for infrastructure, housing and services is on the increase (Mngumi, 2020; Aguilar *et al.*, 2022). Governing them under an alternative rural system limits their potential to develop and imposes policy and reality gaps.

The issue of urban-rural integration explains why it is important to go beyond the traditional physical and administrative boundaries to develop spatial planning frameworks that capture the functional interdependencies. The integrated planning models focus on the development of networks, interconnected functional regions and shared

infrastructure that extends to rural and urban areas increasing the flow of resources, people and services (Pagliarin, 2018; Matoane *et al.*, 2025). Indicatively, through the use of spatial planning methods that recognise peri-urban areas and rural-urban connections, regional development can be achieved by addressing such common challenges as infrastructural deficits, environmental constraints and socio-economic disparities. Empirical studies on Southern Africa focus on the importance of gaps in the coordination between local authorities in an endeavour to manage the urbanisation process and deliver public services effectively (Arabeyyat *et al.*, 2024; Mokone, 2025). These evidence-based suggestions point to co-governing frameworks embracing comprehensive development plans.

A standard legislative framework facilitates co-ordination of spatial and economic planning through the promotion of co-ordinated governance and limiting the disunity of local governments. Studies show that the absence of coordination and overlapping of roles in fragmented planning systems impede effective management and implementation of policies on the urban environment (Arabeyyat *et al.*, 2024; David *et al.*, 2024). This fragmentation in Zimbabwe, as in other places, leads to inefficiencies which adversely affect rural and urban communities in terms of access to infrastructure, services and socioeconomic opportunities (Manyena, 2006; Nyama and Mukwada, 2022). A legislative framework that incorporates rural and urban local authorities in a manner that provides a platform for functional regions to operate effectively, thus providing a platform of sharing on planning of transportation, housing, water security and disaster resilience, areas where interdependence is paramount (Manyena, 2006; Mokone, 2025). In the end, this type of integrated governance promotes the achievement of sustainable development goals, by aligning policies with the realities of socio-spatial dynamics.

When well coordinated in rural and urban areas, spatial planning improves development in the region through facilitation of equitable distribution of resources and better service delivery. The research shows that integrated planning strategies are effective in limiting urban sprawl, enhancing food security and creating sustainable mobility as the interconnectedness of these spatial domains (Pagliarin, 2018; Flipo *et al.*, 2021; Matooane *et al.*, 2025). Furthermore, participation in governance and citizen engagement are also mentioned as the key to effective spatial planning that helps to bridge the rural-urban divide by engaging citizens in the development processes (Nyama and Mukwada, 2022). Coherent legislation can establish synergies among the various stakeholders and promote multi-level cooperation, in response to the local climate risks, mobility needs and infrastructural challenges (Flipo *et al.*, 2021; David *et al.*, 2024). This combined approach will guarantee balanced regional growth and sustainability which are the keys to sustainable urban-rural futures in Zimbabwe.

METHODOLOGY

The information required to analyse the rural-urban dichotomy in local governance in Zimbabwe was accessed using electronic databases like Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science and Science Direct. Keywords like “rural-urban continuum”, “peri-urban governance Zimbabwe”, “multi-level governance Africa”, “urban-rural integration”, “local authority fragmentation” and “spatial planning Zimbabwe”, were used either as independent terms or as a combination of terms to search data. Peer-reviewed journal articles, based on empirical data, were prioritised in terms of reliability of findings in the article. The study was informed by English published sources that were related to this topic.

The inclusion criteria focused on publications that addressed rural-urban governance, decentralisation, devolution, spatial planning, local government systems and peri-urban development, particularly within Zimbabwe, Africa and other comparable developing country contexts. Sources not directly related to the study objectives or lacked sufficient methodological rigor were excluded from the review. The search used no year restriction on the items searched which were sourced in the published articles. The search process generated published sources which were then filtered according to their relevance to come up with those which were relevant and most appropriate to the article.

The research also drew upon reports by the World Bank, the United Nations Habitat and policy briefs and working papers by African regional bodies. Relevant sources were kept since they offered policy views, institutional knowledge and current information on governance reforms, decentralisation and urban-rural growth, stuff not always covered in academic papers.

In this sense, the study is founded on the evaluation of the existing reports and claims, instead of new empirical evidence of the field, relying on textual and thematic analysis to synthesize evidence of case studies such as the Epworth and the Harare hinterlands with theoretical frameworks like the Rural-Urban Continuum and Multi-Level Governance Theories. To find recurring themes, thematic analysis was employed, focusing on institutional splits, governance coordination, citizen involvement, devolution, spatial integration and service provision. All these helped form the basis for study's suggested model to boost local engagement for planning and devolution in Zimbabwe.

FINDINGS

This section presents findings of the study in form of case studies. Two case studies from Zimbabwe are presented. The first one is on Epworth Peri-Urban Settlement (Harare Metropolitan Region) and the other one from Harare-Rural Hinterland Linkages.

CASE STUDY 1: EPWORTH PERI-URBAN SETTLEMENT (HARARE METROPOLITAN REGION)

Epworth, a peri-urban community in the Harare Metropolitan Region, provides an interesting example of the issues of the rural-urban interface. Epworth cannot be categorised into either rural or urban livelihoods and urban pressures due to its unique blend of both rural and urban local authorities in Zimbabwe. This blurring of boundaries is manifested in the fact that, while the informal agricultural activity co-exists with, and is regulated by, a separate legislative regime, the informal residential development is not so regulated, but rather governed by a completely different legislative regime (Galli *et al.*, 2024). Among the governance issues that are eminent in Epworth are poor municipal capacities, fragmented provision of services and perpetuation of informality in housing and land tenure. These issues are symbolic of the contradictions faced by peri-urban areas throughout the world, where ancient distinctions between rural and urban administration restrict integrated planning and sustainable development (Allen, 2003; Bhanye *et al.*, 2024).

The fragmentation of governance in Epworth has resulted in serious issues in its management, especially inefficient service delivery which has a negative effect on the quality of life of the residents. The local government has a problem of limited resources and institutional capacity which is compounded by the overlap of the jurisdictional mandate of the rural and urban councils due to the dichotomous legal framework that separates rural and urban councils. Within this governance vacuum,

informality flourishes and unplanned settlements grow and infrastructure does not keep up with the population growth (Muchadenyika, 2015; Baye, 2023). This fragmentation highlights the inadequacy of the current legal framework in terms of addressing peri-urban dynamics that entail flexible arrangements between the structured nature of urban governance and the customary tenure and informal economies of rural governance (Matooane *et al.*, 2025; Gottero *et al.*, 2021). The inability of the rural and urban policy responses to align leads to chronic marginalisation of peri-urban residents and undermines the coordinated urban planning.

Epworth, therefore, concretely explains why there is an outdated and problematic rigid rural-urban legislative dichotomy in the peri-urban settings in Zimbabwe. Its case justifies the need to integrate rural and urban local authorities using a single and adaptable legal framework that considers the hybrid socio-economic nature of such settlements (Allen, 2003; Galli *et al.*, 2024). A coordinated legislative framework would facilitate harmonious governance structures that would be able to tackle the intertwined challenges of informality, insecurity of land tenure and service delivery. This strategy is in line with the global best practices that have highlighted the significance of recognising rural-urban linkages and designing governance and planning systems that are not based on traditional binary classifications (Chigudu and Chirisa, 2020; Xu *et al.*, 2024). The lessons of Epworth can be used to reinforce the argument that local government legislation in Zimbabwe needs to be reformed to allow the effective, integrated management of the peri-urban settlements in Zimbabwe, to promote sustainable development and social inclusion.

CASE STUDY 2: HARARE-RURAL HINTERLAND LINKAGES

The linkage between the rural and urban Zimbabwe in terms of urban food systems and resource flows exemplifies deep

functional interdependence between rural and urban areas. Cities such as Harare depend heavily on rural production of agricultural products to feed their growing populations, which explains the significance of integrated supply chains that can bridge the spatial gaps (Matooane *et al.*, 2025). This interdependence is realised not just in food supply, but also in trade, labour migration and exchange of resources which, in turn, sustains the livelihoods of urban centres and rural economies. Nevertheless, the governance systems are still very fragmented with rural and urban policies and institutions in silos but functionally integrated. This disintegration compromises the process of coordinated planning and provision of services that are required to support resilient food systems and equitable distribution of resources. The efforts of urban planning, although dealing with issues of infrastructure and food security, are often unable to bridge the rural-urban jurisdictional boundaries, limiting the innovative and holistic policy responses to urban food insecurity in Harare (Battersby and Watson, 2018; Matooane *et al.*, 2025).

The socio-political and economic pressures aggravating the urban food insecurity are added to the persistent governance challenges in the coordination of rural to urban food systems. Studies conducted in the peri-urban and informal settlements in Harare reveal that unemployment, poverty, inflation, collapse of formal food distribution and other factors, contribute to the vulnerability of urban households (Tawodzera, 2011). Furthermore, the rural and urban policy frameworks are segregated and, therefore, making efforts to address these issues in a holistic manner is a challenge as rural producers are not well supported to meet urban demands and urban planners are not well equipped with mechanisms to integrate rural agricultural inputs effectively to meet urban demands. Political forces on land distribution and urban management also contribute to distorting food system dynamics, and peri-urban

access to farms is shaped by partisan interests, making it difficult to allocate resources fairly and plan urban infrastructure (Muchadenyika, 2015). This institutional division emphasises the necessity of mechanisms that would go beyond the traditional administrative and administrative frameworks and will ensure cross-sectoral cooperation between rural and urban administrations.

Considering these complexities, the case of the Harare-Rural hinterland supports the argument of integrated planning and legislative frameworks which reflects the symbiotic relationship between rural and urban jurisdictions. The susceptibility of the urban food system to the disruption of rural production and the lack of governance of the rural economy, reveals that rural and urban economies cannot be effectively governed under different, and sometimes opposite, policies (Zellner *et al.*, 2023; Matooane *et al.*, 2025). By implementing a common legal framework, a consistent governance of land use, food distribution and infrastructural investment could be achieved to support resilience across the interconnected food-energy-water nexus, in peri-urban and urban areas. This type of integrated legislation would enable more equitable flows of resources, systemic vulnerabilities and food security outcomes in both rural production and urban consumption of resources, in the changing socio-political environment of Zimbabwe (Battersby and Watson, 2018; Maphosa and Moyo, 2024). This case eventually illustrates the need to remove the artificial rural-urban division in policy and administration, to open up the potential of the rural-urban functional interdependence of Zimbabwe.

PROPOSED FRAMEWORK FOR INTEGRATION

In Zimbabwe, there are four pillars around which it is possible to construct a conceptual framework to integrate the rural and

urban local authorities. Figure 1 shows the proposed framework for integration in this study.

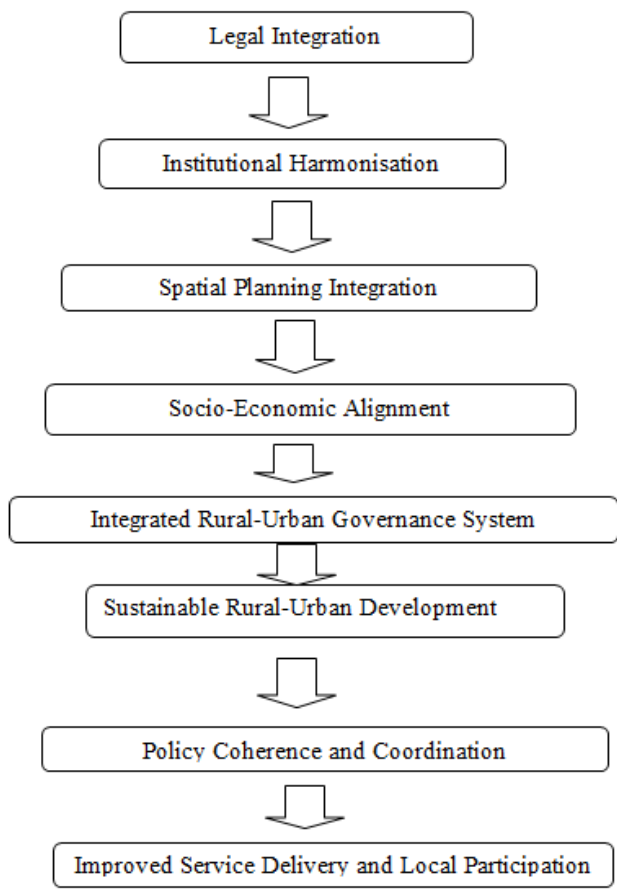


Figure 2: *Proposed framework for rural-urban local authority integration in Zimbabwe* (Author’s compilations, 2026)

The first is legal integration entailing the substitution of individual statutes with a single Local Government Act that cuts across all authorities in a situation where flexibility may be exercised in context. The roles, responsibilities and structures

of governance should be determined in this law in a manner that meets the entire rural-urban continuum. The second pillar is institutional harmonisation that is aimed at harmonising the administrative systems, planning processes and service delivery mechanisms of all the local authorities. These involve standardisation of capacity needs and knowledge sharing among practitioners.

The third pillar is spatial planning integration that points to the necessity of planning systems that cut across administrative lines and capture functional areas instead of inflexible categories. The fourth pillar is the socio-economic alignment that makes sure that policies deal with common agendas like infrastructure, delivery of services and economic growth in both rural and urban regions. This method acknowledges the fact that development problems tend to be similar, irrespective of the classification and must be tackled using the same strategies.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study confirm the Rural-Urban Continuum Theory that states that settlements are located along a fluid gradient, but not rigid binaries, as is the case in the peri-urban areas of Epworth in Zimbabwe and the hinterlands of Harare in Zimbabwe where agricultural activities are intertwined with urban needs. This is in line with the arguments of scholars like Cattaneo *et al.* (2021), who think that the patterns of economic and social development must be subject to policy acknowledgment of these overlaps and denounce dichotomous frameworks as a perpetrator of inefficiencies in resource allocation and service delivery. Equally, Johnson and Scala (2022) bring out the role played by such continuums in the study which challenges the fragmentation of land tenure and institutional overlaps in hybrid spaces of Zimbabwe. The analysis complements the work of Golding and Winkler (2020)

by showing how migration-induced blurring of boundaries occurs in peri-urban settings and the need to legislatively integrate to achieve coherent planning across the spectrum. These alignments confirm the call by this research to unite legislation and place the reforms of Zimbabwe in global academic consensus to transcend artificial boundaries to achieve sustainable spatial management.

The Multi-level Governance (MLG) Theory is a powerful theory which can be used to explain the revelations by the study on institutional fragmentation between rural district councils and urban councils, with an emphasis on vertical and horizontal coordination as the key to effective service delivery. Through meta-analyses, Bel and Warner (2015) and Bel and Seb (2019) demonstrate that the inter-municipal cooperation is cost-effective and leads to better outcomes that directly parallels the identified duplications in infrastructure and planning of separate acts in Zimbabwe. This can be compared to the analysis of transnational networks by Kern and Bulkeley (2009) where MLG breaks silos in climate-vulnerable situations similar to the linkages of the food system in Harare. The case studies herein, such as the jurisdictional contests in Epworth, are familiar to Gnzle (2016) about the use of experimentalist designs to integrate subnational entities, where shared decision-making is desirable to compartmentalised authority. Moreover, these findings are supported by Trefon (2009) and Kokx and Kempen (2010) in their studies of Central African peri-urban fringes where hard-drawn boundaries exacerbate social tensions, thereby supporting the argument that one legislative framework can empower collaborative, adaptive governance in Zimbabwe.

The fact that the rural-urban dichotomy continues to be entrenched in Zimbabwe legislation, reflects the scholarly critiques of the role of the rural-urban dichotomy in

entrenching inequalities, as was seen in the case of peri-urban land markets and service disparities highlighted in the findings. Similar to the Epworth analysis, Bhanye *et al.* (2023, 2024,) grabs of land and tenure on the outskirts of the City of Harare, are led by the elite. De Olde and Oosterlynck (2021) build upon this by conceptualising the divide as symbolic and political in the post-urban setting of Zimbabwe, creating rifts that inhibit inclusive development evident in the unequal flow of resources. This is also agreed upon by Chirisa *et al.* (2021), who attribute the lack of success in climate adaptation to the dichotomous governance, the fragmented responses causing reduced resilience to interconnected regions. These convergences support the proposal of the present study to dissolve the binary by using unified laws, based on the historical analysis of the fading divides in China (Wong *et al.*, 2020).

The study presents integrated spatial planning as mandatory to harness the rural-urban synergies, which is in line with evidence of the world on the need to have unified structures across administrative boundaries. Conceptualising spatial governance, Tan *et al.* (2024) propose the integration of spatial governance to facilitate land-use synergies to reverberate the proposed pillars of the harmonisation of legal planning in Zimbabwe. Pagliarin (2018) exemplifies the use of such models to reduce sprawl and improve mobility in Milan and Barcelona, which is similar to what is being recommended in the hinterlands of Harare. Locally, Matamanda *et al.* (2025), through Matooane *et al.* (2025) highlight the role of urban planning in food security across Africa and criticise silos that the cases in the study reveal in peri-urban vulnerabilities. Further evidence of the dissolution of hierarchies in favour of collaborative environments is Nuhu (2018) on Tanzanian peri-urban actor relations that has the potential to position Zimbabwe as a single-legislation pathway towards coherent infrastructure and economic alignment. All these academic

integrations confirm the conceptual framework and calls on policy changes to reflect holistic development which reflects lived continuums as opposed to outdated categorisations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The rural-urban dichotomy is no longer effective in understanding and managing the changing settlement patterns in Zimbabwe, where peri-urban expansions and functional interdependencies make traditional separations a thing of the past. The existence of separate legislative frameworks of rural district and urban councils continues to perpetuate inefficiencies that are manifested in the fragmented service delivery, contested land tenure in the hybrid zones such as Epworth, and disrupted food systems that link Harare to its hinterlands. The empirical evidence of these contexts shows that there is a clear rural-urban continuum characterised by overlapping agricultural practices, urban pressures and similar vulnerabilities to climate and economic shocks that require recognition beyond artificial administrative boundaries. The existing dual structures institutionalise the difference in infrastructure, planning and resource distribution, which reduces the adaptive capacities of local authorities in response to accelerated urbanisation. The shift to a single system of law will bring governance into accordance with these spatial realities and the harmonisation of institutions and multi-level co-operation needed to ensure equitable development. Such integration will provide a seamless operation across the continuum and will result in an enhanced service delivery, spatial coherence and socio-economic resilience in the entire country. This transformation puts Zimbabwe in a position to absorb synergies between rural productivities and urban demands, thereby ensuring sustainable management of emerging peri-urban dynamics and inclusive growth, reflecting experienced interdependencies and not obsolete categorisations.

Policymakers should consider adopting a single Local Government Act that amalgamates rural and urban authorities with flexible classifications based on the properties of functional continuum to eliminate jurisdictional overlaps and to have single planning of the peri-urban areas. To mitigate duplication and maximise efficiency in areas such as waste management and water supply, local authorities should set up inter-municipal cooperation platforms, using insights of case studies on how Epworth became fragmented, to facilitate a joint resource pooling, shared infrastructure project and cross-boundary service delivery. The capacity-building efforts on governance skills in the hybrid settlements become necessary which would address institutional weaknesses as revealed in the linkages of the hinterland in the City of Harare. The spatial planning frameworks need a redesign to focus on functional regions as opposed to rigid boundaries. Food systems, transport networks and environmental protection should be integrated in redesigning these spatial planning frameworks. The processes of community mobilisation should entrench the participatory processes of decision-making in countering the elite-led land contests that are observed in the peri-urban cases through inclusive fora that incorporate indigenous knowledge and resident contributions towards equitable prioritisation of service delivery. Lastly, the monitoring and evaluation systems should be put in place to trace the progress of integration using performance measures of the proposed conceptual pillars, such as legal, institutional, spatial and socio-economic.

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