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Unpacking the Reported Impacts of COVID-19 in Rural Contexts: Evidence from two Rural Municipalities in South Africa

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has been primarily analysed within urban contexts, has revealed a significant gap in understanding its ramifications within rural areas. This study aims to address this gap by drawing upon the principles of Resilience Theory to shed light on the repercussions of the pandemic in rural contexts, thereby highlighting an overlooked aspect. This research employs a qualitative paradigm grounded in primary data collected from two rural municipalities, Matatiele and Winnie Madikizela Mandela Local Municipalities, in South Africa's Eastern Cape Province. The primary data is derived from 11 focus group interviews involving essential stakeholders and 13 individual interviews that were purposefully selected. The study unravels a spectrum of adverse impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic across the two municipalities by thematically transcribing and coding audio records of

interviews and focus groups using NVivo, employing inductive and deductive coding approaches. These impacts include employment loss, bereavement, food insecurity, and an upsurge in reported cases of gender-based violence. The pandemic's ripples extend to cultural practices, education, and community well-being, as evidenced by the waning participation in cultural traditions, declining interest in education among school-goers, and a surge in substance abuse and criminal activities like stock theft. In light of these findings, the study advocates for customised pandemic responses in rural areas underpinned by the Resilience Theory framework. This entails endorsing enhanced healthcare infrastructure, fostering community-driven surveillance, promoting diversified livelihood strategies, and bolstering local governance structures. As the study expands our understanding, it concurrently underscores the significance of further exploration. The proposed avenue of research lies in examining how collaborative efforts among rural-based institutions can augment community resilience against the dual challenges of pandemics and disasters. Through this lens, the study emphasises the imperative of building adaptive capacity within rural communities, emphasising their ability to navigate uncertainties and emerge stronger in adversity.

Keywords: *COVID-19, Impacts, Rurality, Shocks, Vulnerability*

1. Introduction and Background

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed the structure and functioning of society. Lockdowns and other forms of restrictions implemented by governments around the world to stem the spread of the pandemic resulted in severe socioeconomic impacts, including increased poverty and unemployment, food insecurity, mental health-related issues, and an increase in crime, including gender-based violence (John, Okem, Mubangizi, Adekanla, Ngubane, & Barry, 2021). While the severe forms of restrictions have been mostly removed and society is slowly recovering, the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic will have a lasting effect on society. Understanding the nature and extent of the pandemic's implications across various contexts is critical in preparing for and responding to future similar large-scale emergencies. In this paper, we explore the reported impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in two rural municipalities (Matatiele Local Municipality (MLM) and Winnie Madikizela Mandela Local Municipality (WMMLM)) in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Our study offers a significant contribution to the comprehension of the complexities of the pandemic in rural environments. An excessive emphasis on urban settings has overshadowed these contexts. The paper comprises five

distinct sections, each fulfilling a particular purpose. The first segment examines the documented socioeconomic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, as evidenced in the existing literature. The third section comprehensively examines pre-existing vulnerability factors within rural contexts, highlighting their exacerbating role in the pandemic's impacts. Furthermore, we contextualise the discussion within the framework of resilience theory. Subsequently, we elaborate on the study's methodology, providing details of the approaches employed. Following this, we unveil and critically analyse the study's findings in the subsequent section. Ultimately, this culminates in the presentation of conclusions and the formulation of pertinent recommendations.

1.1. Socioeconomic Impacts of COVID-19

Across the world, countries imposed restrictions on movement and economic activity in response to the coronavirus pandemic. These domestic measures to curb the spread of the virus, reduce global demand for goods and services, and decline international investment have severely negative consequences for business, family sustainability, and livelihoods (Yesufu, 2021; Haider et al., (2021). In response to the pandemic, South Africa declared a National State of Disaster in March 2020 under the Disaster Management Act of 2002 (Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, 2020). A review of lockdown measures in nine sub-Saharan African countries shows that South Africa implemented one of the strictest measures. The lockdown and the restriction of movement were psychological traumasthat most South Africans had to deal with (Yesufu, 2021). A widespread disruption of traditional ways of life emerged, preventing people from visiting friends and family. Restrictions on attending religious gatherings were imposed, allowing entry to department stores solely for those wearing face masks. The country's borders were shut, a curfew was imposed, and the closure of educational institutions was mandated. The South African Defence Force was also deployed to support the police in maintaining law and order (Yesufu, 2021).

Small and micro enterprises closed, and some will never open, while others struggled due to low revenue intakes incurred during the national lockdown in South Africa (Fubah and Moos, 2022). Some businesses reduced their operating hours, leading to layoffs and reduced wages, while some employees were put on unpaid leave (Statistics South Africa, 2020). In relation to employment, the COVID-19-induced lockdown

affected mostly unskilled and semi-skilled employees and those in the informal sector (Department of Trade, Industry, and Competition, 2020). Workers in the informal sector were more vulnerable, as they usually could not access the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF). They often operate on a no-work, no-pay basis (Statistics South Africa, 2020).

Household expenditure among the South African population changed because of the lockdown restrictions, as some people worked reduced hours or were put on unpaid leave (Hamadziripi & Chitimira, 2021). COVID-19 further worsened the instability of South Africa's public finances as more than half a trillion rands were channelled towards stimulating the economy (National Treasury, 2020a). Furthermore, most South African municipalities' revenue fell drastically when the demands on them increased as more people failed or deferred payment of their bills due to reduced household income (Presidency of South Africa, 2021:308).

Thus, the COVID-19-induced nationwide lockdown resulted in substantial revenue losses from the economic shock of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa (Presidency of South Africa, 2021). The concomitant measures to protect the public from the health risks posed by COVID-19 significantly slowed South Africa's economic growth (Presidency of South Africa, 2021). South Africa experienced its biggest recorded decline in economic output in the second quarter of 2020 because of the strict COVID-19 lockdown (National Treasury, 2020b).

1.2. Pre-existing Factors that Increase the Vulnerability of Rural Communities to COVID-19

Characterised by a large rural population, South Africa's Eastern Cape province is the poorest in the country (Statistics South Africa, 2019). To understand the context of poverty in that province, one must consider the drivers that, in combination, lead to that situation. Before South Africa became a democracy in 1994 and established its new constitution in 1996, the country was divided into four provinces set aside for white people and 10 "homelands" (small, unsustainable states designated for black people). The Eastern Cape was demarcated in 1994 to include part of the former Cape Province, which was previously one of the four provinces of South Africa's pre-democracy era. The eastern half of the present-day Eastern Cape province, where this study was located, contains two former homelands, the Transkei and Ciskei. In contrast,

the western half falls within the former white South Africa, the former Cape Provincial Administration areas. The problems of poverty and socioeconomic strife in the homelands are well documented (Mamdani, 1996; Kepe, 1999; Ntsebeza, 2004; Westaway, 2012; Tshishonga, 2019; Fransman & Yu, 2019) and continue to plague the province post-1994.

It is important to note that the rural areas of South Africa are not homogeneous. The Constitution of South Africa, 1996, lists three different types of municipalities; however, there is no differentiation between rural and urban areas in defining the role of local government (Republic of South Africa, 1996). The only distinction made outside of metropolitan municipalities is between category B, local, and category C, district municipalities. Nevertheless, the Municipal Infrastructure Investment Framework (MIIF) disaggregates local and metropolitan municipalities into five distinct groups. These five groups include metropolitan municipalities/large cities (A), secondary cities (B1), municipalities with a large town as their core (B2), and municipalities with small towns (B3) characterised by rural areas with commercial farms where livelihoods depend on commercial agriculture. Lastly, B4 municipalities (such as WMMLM and MLM) are primarily rural. B4 municipalities are identified by their dispersed clusters of homes and are mainly found in areas with communal land tenure, where traditional leaders bear responsibility for land administration.

Post-1994, South Africa established a wall-to-wall municipal system, thereby extending municipal governance systems to rural areas previously under the traditional leadership of chiefs (RSA, 1998; Cameron, 2001; Kanyane, 2011). The extension of urban governance forms into rural areas has seen the constitutionally prescribed role of local government's mandate as represented by councillors co-exist alongside that of traditional leaders (Mubangizi 2020, Qumba 2021). Thus, while access to land plots and management centres around the traditional leaders, providing a range of public services supporting land management and livelihood activities centres around the local government with the local councillor as its local political representative. Communal land is a shared resource characterised by an open access problem because it is challenging to bar other users from accessing and benefiting from it effectively (Ostrom, 1990). This scenario leads to land degradation and weak benefits from the land.

The primary responsibility of a municipality is to provide essential services to the community under its jurisdiction (RSA, 1996, S.153). The ability of municipalities to respond effectively to community needs is

contingent on various factors, including their capacity to generate revenue through property taxes and user fees (Balie & Horn, 2021). This reliance on government grants, which is also common among the communities served by rural municipalities, is an unsustainable situation, particularly given their mandate to enhance local economic development and provide access to water. Although South Africa has expanded its welfare programmes to rural areas since 1994, focusing on rural housing, electrification, and the upgrade of feeder roads, the socioeconomic impact on rural areas has been minimal. Therefore, understanding how rural areas have coped during the pandemic is imperative.

In their study, Kusumasari, Alam, and Siddiqui (2010) elicited the capability requirements for local governments to manage disasters in developing countries. They found that local government bodies lack skills and expertise when dealing with crises, resulting in communities facing unexpected and worst-case situations during an emergency. Kusumasari et al. 2010 averred that the community's physical and economic vulnerability in disaster areas was a real issue, as were the limited resources and expertise available to the local government. Their conclusion suggests communities are more vulnerable to disasters if the local government lacks crucial resources. Bang's (2013) study in Cameroon and Manda's (2014) study in Karonga in Malawi showed similar findings. Further, according to Bang (2013) and Manda (2014), partisan politics and the quest for political support impact the local governance of disaster risks, while embezzlement and corruption adversely affect disaster management. Thus, although it is best suited to handle disasters and pandemics, the local government institution is hampered by a lack of human, physical, financial, and social resources.

According to Tselios and Tompkins (2017), a successful response to disaster and recovery phases depends on coordination and collaboration across many levels of government, organisations, and agencies that might have access to sufficient resources. This finding is similar to that of Sambala, E. Z., Kanyenda, T., Iwu, C. J., Iwu, C. D., Jaca, A., & Wiysonge, C. S. (2018), who observed that the lack of cooperation and partnership from non-health sector preparedness made interoperability and integration of planning efforts and services impossible. Further, their study found value in the capability of local government and the readiness needed to address broader issues rather than only the immediate responses to the disaster. Bang (2013), therefore, recommended the involvement of local communities in post-disaster resettlement planning and risk reduction initiatives.

In South Africa, the capacity of local government to deliver on its constitutional mandate has always been under scrutiny. Many studies have shown municipal performance weaknesses due to various factors (Reddy, 2016; Reddy, Nemec, & de Vries, 2015). Annually, the Auditor General of South Africa's (AGSA) reports highlight weaknesses in the performance of municipalities (Auditor General of South Africa, 2020). Several response mechanisms to COVID-19, including basic hygiene, communication, and transport, fall within South African municipalities' mandate as succinctly captured in crucial legislation and policies. The pandemic has, as such, increased the ability of poorly resourced rural municipalities to respond to the needs of their equally poor citizenry.

2. Theoretical Grounding

Against the background, as mentioned above, resilience theory holds that systems can adapt and thrive in the face of challenges. Therefore, to better understand the role of pre-existing conditions in COVID-19 prevention and management, it is critical to examine such conditions at both household and institutional levels. Within this theoretical framework, a host of essential concerns emerge. They relate to the resources and cultural systems in each community. These concerns also extend to evaluating the capacity and vulnerability of municipalities to respond to disasters and shocks. The focus of this study is to investigate the context of Winnie Madikizela Mandela Local Municipality and Matatiele Local Municipality in South Africa's Eastern Cape Province through the lens of resilience theory. By doing so, the study aims to shed light on these communities' interaction and adaptation mechanisms during the pandemic and identify potential avenues for strengthening their resilience in the face of adversity.

Contemporary scholarship has emphasised vulnerability's crucial role in producing adverse outcomes such as poverty, crime, and conflict. Building on this foundation, Van Breda (2018) has highlighted the evolution of resilience theory, which seeks to understand resilience within broader social systems and grapple with power and social justice issues. Carpenter, Westley, & Turner (2005) have illuminated the practical underpinnings of resilience theory, asserting its conceptual relevance to sustainability. If sustainability refers to a system's ability to maintain productivity despite significant disruptions or perturbations, including intense stressors (Heijman, Hagelaar, & Van Der Heide 2019), then resilience theory offers a robust conceptual framework. In the

context of this study, adopting resilience theory enriches our understanding of how rural communities were affected by the challenges of the pandemic. It highlights the interplay between vulnerability and social dynamics, guiding our understanding of the complex factors influencing resilience trajectories.

3. Materials and Methods

The choice of the Eastern Cape province as our research setting is grounded in its distinction as the most economically disadvantaged among South Africa's nine provinces. This deliberate selection allows us to thoroughly investigate the pandemic's impacts within a context marked by heightened vulnerability and pre-existing socioeconomic challenges. To comprehensively explore these impacts, our research employed a qualitative approach anchored in a purposive sampling design. The data collection process encompassed both individual interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), with careful consideration given to the composition of these groups.

Eleven two-hour-long FGDs were conducted, engaging participants from diverse backgrounds, including local communities, traditional leaders, government officials, civil society organisations, and political representatives from the two municipalities under study. This ensured a comprehensive representation of various perspectives and stakeholders. Furthermore, thirteen individual interviews were carried out to provide a deeper understanding of individual experiences and insights.

Our purposive sampling design was designed to achieve balanced gender representation, thus enhancing the inclusivity of our research. Each focus group comprised an average of six participants, contributing to dynamic discussions and varied viewpoints. The research team, alongside locally trained research assistants, facilitated all interviews and FGDs, ensuring a consistent and respectful approach to data collection. The interviews were meticulously recorded, transcribed, translated, and subsequently imported into NVivo for systematic analysis. Our analytical approach involved employing both inductive and deductive thematic coding to extract meaningful insights from the rich data.

Importantly, our research study obtained ethical clearance from the Human and Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of KwaZulu Natal (approval code: HSSREC/00002780/2021), ensuring adherence to rigorous ethical standards throughout the research process.

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the COVID-19 pandemic has destructive effects on virtually all rural communities' livelihoods, from economic to cultural and social domains. In particular, respondents from both Matatiele and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela local municipalities attested to the ensuing impacts, which are as follows:

4.1 High Deaths

COVID-19 led to many deaths in these rural communities. Thus, the high death rates of loved ones during the pandemic had a major negative impact, worsened by several related impacts. One of the ward councillors noted that these deaths were higher in the second wave of the pandemic. He said, *there were a relative number of deaths with the first wave, but the second wave was devastating for us. There were lots of deaths* (FGD, Ward Councillors, WMMLM).

The second wave of the pandemic in South Africa saw higher infection rates than the first across the country. South Africa's entry into the second wave was announced at the beginning of December 2020. The provinces driving this wave were the Western Cape, leading with 30% of positive cases, followed by the Eastern Cape (24%)¹. Although there were indications of a decrease in overall death rates attributed to COVID-19 during the second wave, there was a contrasting surge in COVID-19-positive cases. The study participants reported a notable increase in fatalities during this period.

Rural communities notably witnessed high death rates amongst local chiefs and traditional leaders because of higher exposure due to their roles in the communities and a lack of government support for their personal and community safety. As one traditional leader noted, *if you look at the way many chiefs died when the pandemic first hit us, it is so scary*. (FGD, Traditional Leaders, Matatiele). Traditional leaders were contacted first when someone died from the COVID-19 infection; they provided permits to allow relatives to plan and attend funerals following regulations restricting movements and gatherings. This meant they had contact with people exposed to the virus, some of whom did not follow protocols. Additionally, it was difficult for community members to

¹ <https://sacoronavirus.co.za/2020/12/09/sa-enters-covid-19-second-wave/> Accessed on 26-08.2023

obtain death certificates or conduct burials of their loved ones who died due to “restrictions, non-availability of Home Affairs staff, bad roads, and financial challenges” (FGD, Traditional Leaders, WMMLM). The chiefs were not able to assist their communities financially despite these challenges, and this appears to be disturbing to them, as one chief puts it:

We can't even help the poorest families who do not have anything to bury their loved ones because we are also poor; we do not get resources to that effect; we only receive our salaries, and that's it (FGD, Traditional leaders, WMMLM).

4.2 Disruption of Schooling

The closing of schools disrupted learning and further disadvantaged rural learners. While the government attempted to limit the impact by introducing online learning, rural communities suffered due to poor connectivity, their inability to afford appropriate tools (e.g., laptops), and the skills required for online learning.

A traditional leader pointed out that

....our kids were told to learn online, but they were not provided with tools to help them learn. They did not have data or Wi-Fi to carry on with the schoolwork. (FGD Traditional Leaders Matatiele).

Poor connectivity was also a major challenge for families that made efforts to ensure that their children continued to learn online. Finding the right spot for a good connection often requires travelling, which comes at a cost. This situation was detailed by a participant as follows:

they can't connect, and they can't really engage with the material that they received from their institutions to be able to do their work properly. They would have to travel from home to town. You would see how vast Bizana is, and some would be from wards like Ward and Ward 25, your Xolobeni side, going to town. Some spent around R120 on a single trip to town and another R120 going back home (FGD Local Councillors, WMMLM).

Participants further reported that the closing of schools had other consequences, such as the destruction of important water sources, such

as wells or springs, by children who had too much playtime. It also led to a loss of interest in education. Participants reported that some of their children became demotivated and no longer saw any value in regularly attending school.

Other studies show the impact of the pandemic on education in South Africa as well as in other parts of the world with regards to the loss of learning due to the closure of schools, widening of existing education inequality, and the reverse of progress that students had made over time (Soudien, Reddy, & Harvey, 2022; Onyema, Eucheria, Obafemi, Sen, Atonye, Sharma & Alsayed, (2020); Le Grange, (2021). The need to respond urgently to the pandemic did not allow for sufficient planning for self-learning and online education. Thus, richer and better-resourced schools and households could continue with some form of learning, although they are still encountering several challenges. Poorer and disadvantaged schools and households, on the other hand, found it extremely difficult to continue learning due to a lack of resources, space, and poor living conditions, amongst other things (Le Grange(2021); Soudien; Reddy, & Harvey, 2022;).

4.3 Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is a major pre-existing vulnerability condition for the rural population studied. COVID-19 worsened this due to job losses and restrictions on movement. A participant in the FGD with traditional leaders in WMMLM reported that:

People lost their jobs and had no food at home, but they stayed at home. COVID-19 has made us suffer and we are still suffering now because so many people have lost their jobs. (FGD, Traditional Leaders, WMMLM).

Pre-existing food insecurity was worsened due to job losses as a result of the pandemic and lockdown regulations.

People had lost their jobs, yet were restricted from going out to seek other means of surviving because of measures to control the spread of the virus (FGD, Traditional Leaders, MLM).

The impacts of COVID-19 on food insecurity in rural contexts have been reported in other studies (Cattivelli & Rusciano 2020; Hamadani et al. 2020). Hamadani et al. (2021:1380) examined the swift effects of

COVID-19 stay-at-home orders on Bangladeshi women's families, revealing impacts on socioeconomic factors, food security, mental health, and intimate partner violence.

4.4 Gender-Based Violence

Participants noted a spike in gender-based violence during the pandemic. This particularly concerns the beating of women by their husbands. This impact was noted only by traditional leaders, who argued that it was because women were disrespectful of or mocking their husbands. The participants suggested that some women were being insensitive to how the job loss was affecting their partners and said things that angered the men:

Men often express discomfort with excessive communication from women, even if the content may not align with societal norms. In certain situations, when a husband faces job loss, it can lead to strained interactions where remarks like “give me your trousers so I can find work since you can't” are made by the wife. (FGD, Traditional Leaders, Matatiele).

This foregoing fits into the pattern of social norms that contribute to violence against women (OXFAM, 2018). The exponential rise in gender-based violence across the world during the COVID-19 pandemic has been variously reported (Dlamini, 2022; Odeku, 2021; Amaechi, Thobejane, & Rasalokwane, 2021). The reasons for this upsurge vary, but they are broadly attributed to how social and economic stresses due to the pandemic and lockdown aggravated pre-existing social, cultural, and interpersonal toxic behaviours and conditions. The above explanation from a study participant shows how these might manifest at the household level.

Participants acknowledged the commendable efforts of the local chieftainness in addressing gender-based violence within the community. This recognises that traditional leaders, as highlighted by Teffo-Menziwa, Mullick, and Prince Dlamini (2010), play a significant role in preventing and addressing such issues. However, while existing literature underscores this role, additional research is warranted to provide a more comprehensive grounding for this finding.

4.5 *Difficulty Accessing Health Facilities*

During the pandemic, it was difficult for communities to access healthcare services because they were either closed or full of patients in need of healthcare. The need to urgently prioritise those infected with COVID-19 meant that people with other health challenges could not receive needed services. A participant gave an example of one of the major hospitals in Matatiele, which services the town and its many rural communities, “*being closed for other patients with another disease as it was with COVID-19*” (FGD, Traditional Leaders, Matatiele).

The poor roads were also reported as putting communities at risk, and participants cited how this has led to the loss of lives and caused several types of suffering for communities. One respondent commented that,

People of Mkhandlweni cannot go to town when the road is wet; even if there is someone who is very sick, no one can go anywhere. People must wait until the roads are dry because they are undrivable when they are is wet; that is how terrible the state of our roads is (FGD, Traditional Leaders, WMMLM)

4.6 *Loss of Livestock through Theft*

Studies (Hou, Zeng, Hu, & Hu, 2022; Kim & Phillips, 2021) have shown that the COVID-19 pandemic affects crime. However, the direction of the impact is dependent on the nature of the crime. Crimes, particularly contact crimes, were found to be on the decline because fewer people were out in the open because of COVID-19-related restrictions on personal choices to reduce the risks of infections, thus reducing the opportunities for contact crime (Hou et al., 2022). In the context of this study, crime, particularly theft of livestock, heightened in rural communities during the pandemic. This happened both locally and involved cross-border criminal activities in villages by the border with Lesotho. Traditional leaders shared their experiences with this challenge. One said:

We experience an abnormal rise in livestock theft. Many of our animals were crossing the border to Lesotho. Then, when you have to go after them trying to chase your animals, especially cows, you will find that you cannot cross the border without testing for the virus, which was very costly to some of the poor

community members, and they find themselves stranded to the extent that some had heart attacks (FGD, Traditional Leaders, Matatiele).

Cross-border livestock theft between Lesotho and South Africa is endemic (Aerni-Flessner, Twala, Mushonga, & Magaiza, (2021); Clack, (2022). The participants in the MLM, which is adjacent to the border with Lesotho, observed that lockdown stock theft as people did not have the freedom to move while criminals easily moved stolen livestock to sell in surrounding villages. Participants felt that regulations were unfair to them because they did not allow them to recover their stolen livestock across the border into Lesotho due to the requirements to produce negative PCR test results to cross borders. Thus, these regulations and the financial challenges of these livestock owners enabled these crimes to continue without repercussions. In this regard, Maluleke (2020) also noted that stock theft, resulting in millions of rand losses, increased during the lockdown period brought on by the COVID-19 global pandemic (Maluleke, 2020:2696).

4.7 Inability to Engage in Cultural Practices

Important cultural practices were halted by regulations to control the spread of the COVID-19 virus. This affected communities in several ways. From the perspective of participants, it meant that young people had too much free time and used it negatively. They also could not go through appropriate rites of passage, such as initiation, at the right time, resulting in material, physical, and spiritual consequences for individuals and communities. A traditional leader argued that

In culture and initiation school, during COVID-19, there were a lot of problems. There were a lot of young uncontrollable boys. These boys find themselves using drugs because they could not go to the initiation school, even now as parents we have a problem with how are we going to help these young boys to eventually go to the initiation school. We believe that they have too much time on their hands which is why they find time for the drugs (FGD, Traditional Leaders, Matatiele).

The responses suggest that the pause in initiation activities resulted in a lot of violence, drug use, and stress among young people. The responses also suggested that this is because it places too much time in the hands of young people and is also the consequence of not

transitioning from being a boy to being a man at the right age. Thus, the violence observed is a reaction or an effect of this.

A significant impact of the pandemic pertained to cultural practices, notably the modification of funerals. Participation and rituals associated with funerals were adapted during lockdown phases where they were permitted. These alterations not only transformed engagement with funerals but also redefined the spiritual significance and essence of specific funeral customs. For instance, regulations mandated limitations such as restricting funerals to one hour, capping attendees at 150 individuals, prohibiting bodies from remaining at home, and discontinuing customary night vigils (FGD, Councillors, WMMLM). Additionally, an example highlighted the shift from slaughtering cows to sheep or goats for funerals, symbolising the animals that accompany the deceased, which deeply impacted the spiritual dimension in these rural communities (FGD, Traditional Leaders, Matatiele). This adaptation of cultural practices seemed to introduce stress in certain communities and possibly explain shifts in community well-being.

4.8 Loss of Income

One of the consistent themes in this study is the fact that many people lost their jobs and means of earning a living during the pandemic. This has been an underlying or intersecting factor in other themes. Participants provided specific examples and other details that could enrich our understanding of the dynamics of job loss during the pandemic and how it affected food and other needs. An FGD participant observed that,

As the pandemic hit and had our lockdown in late March 2020, all our Department of Forestry Fisheries and Environment (DFFE) funded projects were put on hold, meaning participants weren't working and earning an income. They were also not able to get the COVID-19 grant as they were still technically employed by the project... almost 180 people could not work (FGD, Local NGO, Matatiele).

This was a difficult situation for those affected because they were caught up in a condition where they could not earn due to paused funding but could also not receive government support to cope with the pandemic because of the technical requirements for beneficiaries of such support.

Additionally, the loss of jobs by relatives in urban areas heavily impacted the families they supported back in rural areas, and their return home without jobs also created additional stress on their households. This resulted in what a participant described as a chronic food shortage due to unemployment. For a local NGO in Matatiele, their inability to continue with business due to the pandemic led to the loss of employees because they could only pay when they traded. A participant summarised the situation as follows:

Before lockdown, knew that weekly or every second week we deliver charcoal. It has been two months without selling and the charcoal is piling up in storage. If charcoal is not sold, then employees don't get salaries. The three employees have left due to a lack of income, even though they are working every day (FGD, Local NGO, Matatiele).

The pandemic exposed the vulnerable employment landscape of rural communities, revealing a pre-existing lack of resilient livelihood assets. Consequently, many individuals within these communities, regardless of their geographical location, were already susceptible to the pandemic's adverse effects. In this context, participant 5's statement emphasises that "for those already unemployed, the pandemic didn't significantly alter their employment status" (FGD, WMMLM). This implies that while the pandemic didn't notably change their unemployment status, it exacerbated their overall livelihood challenges, impacting alternate income sources and leading to family members returning from towns to villages due to job losses. Additionally, individuals reliant on pre-pandemic grants experienced relatively unaffected conditions, as they continued to receive consistent support during the crisis. The impacts of the pandemic on livelihoods in the context of this study are consistent with those of John et al. (2022:1), who found that "increased risk of the pandemic is likely to reduce incomes and standards of living amongst poor communities"

4.9 Substance Use and Abuse

Study participants reported increased use and abuse of substances by young people, particularly boys. This was linked to the fact that initiation schools were closed. Participants also noted that the selling of liquor during the pandemic contributed to the spread of the pandemic and other illnesses due to how drinkers drank in groups and shared a single beer jug and the content of local beer. One chief explained,

People in the villages drink beer in numbers, they don't drink alone therefore that leads to a high rate of infections in our communities, people in the communities share the jug of brewed beer from home and it circulates them up until the beer is finished hence the high rate of infections in communities. This beer that they brew at home is so dangerous because it is a mixer of yeast and water, it doesn't have any nutrition in it except for making those that use it to be sick, they become so dark, and fall sick. (FGD, Traditional Leaders Matatiele).

Certain traditional leaders attributed the issue of drug-related problems within their communities to foreign nationals living among them. A particular leader pointed out that individuals from Pakistan and Ethiopia who rented vacant spaza shops were seen as contributing to the drug issue. This influx of foreign nationals in rural areas was linked to a rise in both the availability and usage of drugs. Expressing concern, one traditional leader further conveyed that drug-related challenges seem to emerge wherever these individuals are situated. Their alleged sale of drugs to children was criticised, reflecting a disregard for the well-being of the local youth (FGD, Traditional Leaders, Matatiele). The spike in drug and substance abuse during COVID is consistent with the findings of other studies (Zaami, Marinelli, & Vari, 2020; Avena, Simkus, Lewandowski, Gold, & Potenza, 2021).

5. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic and global efforts to contain its transmission have brought a spectrum of adverse socioeconomic repercussions. This study, positioned within the context of resilience theory, delved into the pandemic's impact on rural areas by examining two distinct case studies: the Matatiele and Winnie Madikizela Mandela local municipalities in South Africa's Eastern Cape province. Drawing upon the insights derived from thirteen focus group discussions and nineteen individual interviews, this study has revealed various socioeconomic repercussions emanating from the COVID-19 pandemic. These encompassed the profound loss of community members and the ensuing grief, an escalation in reported incidents of gender-based violence and various criminal activities, and the challenge of accessing healthcare facilities due to lockdown measures. The heightened focus on COVID-19 patients also exacerbated the loss of income and livelihood prospects.

Moreover, the repercussions extended to education, as children faced barriers to attending school and adapting to remote learning due to resource constraints and a lack of technical skills. The inability to engage in cultural practices alongside school closures contributed to an uptick in substance abuse. The study underscored that rural communities within the examined municipalities have borne the brunt of diverse pandemic impacts, underscoring the exigency for local institutions to prioritise disaster preparedness. By capitalising on the principles of resilience theory, collaboration among local government bodies, traditional leaders, and grassroots NGOs can be harnessed to effectively guide communities in navigating the ramifications of COVID-19 and potential future emergencies. In light of these study insights, a set of targeted recommendations is proposed, aimed at informing governmental pandemic responses and tailored to address challenges within rural contexts:

- i. It is the responsibility of governments to actively encourage and support diversified livelihood opportunities within rural contexts to enhance the resilience of rural economies against pandemics. This can be achieved by fostering endeavours across sectors such as agriculture, cottage industries, and skill development.
- ii. Establishing or reinforcing tailored social safety net programmes is imperative to shield vulnerable rural populations. These measures guarantee access to essential support, encompassing food, healthcare, and basic necessities, during crisis periods.
- iii. Investing in capacity-building initiatives for local governance systems holds substantial merit. This empowerment enables effective crisis management, coordinated responses, and targeted resource allocation at the grassroots level.
- iv. Enhancing digital connectivity across rural areas is pivotal to bridging rural-urban disparities and ensuring vital services reach remote areas. This can be achieved by bridging the digital divide and improving access to information dissemination, online education, and telecommuting.
- v. Facilitating collaborations between the public and private sectors is a pragmatic approach to rural-specific challenges during pandemics. Such partnerships can yield innovative solutions spanning healthcare delivery, logistics, and technology integration.
- vi. Customising communication strategies to align with rural populations' cultural sensitivities is essential. Information

dissemination becomes more effective by raising awareness of preventive measures, importance of vaccination, and available healthcare services.

vii. Nurturing local supply chains for essential goods is crucial for reducing external dependency during crises. Governments should incentivise and invest in these localised systems to ensure a steady flow of necessary supplies to rural areas.

viii. Further investigation is warranted into how rural-based institutions can collectively and collaboratively enhance the resilience of rural communities in the face of pandemics and disasters.

Credit author statement

Mubangizi, BC: Conceptualisation, Funding acquisition; Investigation, Methodology; Project administration; Formal analysis; Writing - original draft and gave the discussion a theoretical grounding. **Okem, AE:** Conceptualisation; Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Formal analysis; Roles/Writing - initial draft; Writing - review & editing. **John, SF:** Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Formal analysis; Roles/Writing - original draft; Writing - review & editing. **Ngubane, L.P:** Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Roles/Writing - original draft. **Barry, I:** Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Roles/Writing - original draft. **Adekanla, N:** Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Formal analysis; Writing - review & editing.

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