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Beyond Colonial Legacies: (Re)Conceptualising Rural Development Through the RDGI in South Africa

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Abstract: Despite constitutional recognition, significant barriers remain to the integration of traditional authorities into formal planning and development decision-making processes in South Africa. Observing resistance from traditional authorities towards what they deem as exclusive and restrictive planning instruments, this study interrogates the intricate power dynamics between traditional leadership structures and imposed local government entities in rural development, planning, and governance processes to propose a cooperative governance framework within the South African context. The proposed framework is termed the “Rural Development and Governance Initiative” (RDGI), which aims to bridge the divide between traditional and local authorities. This study applied qualitative methods to investigate the relations between authorities in Limpopo province, South Africa. The findings reveal ongoing disputes between traditional and local authorities regarding decision-making powers, legitimacy in development and planning, and the capacity limitations and constraints faced by traditional authorities. The implications of this work extend to the (re)conceptualisation of policies and future research directions in rural governance, land development, and planning in South Africa, advocating for a shift from foreign models to those that reflect African realities and aspirations.



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1. Introduction

Traditional leadership structures have been integral to African societies since time immemorial, predating the violent disruptions of colonialism and apartheid. These Indigenous governance¹ systems, deeply rooted in cultural ethos and worldviews, have demonstrated resilience despite centuries of oppression and deliberate attempts at their erasure, what Emeagwali calls Epistemicide² [2]. The colonial and apartheid regimes, recognising the power and influence of these structures, sought to manipulate and co-opt them to serve their oppressive agendas [1].

The post-1994 democratic dispensation, while acknowledging the importance of traditional authorities as custodians of customary law and cultural heritage³ [3], has struggled to integrate these Indigenous systems into the new governance framework. The inclusion of traditional leadership institutions in the constitution and the subsequent Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act of 2013 represent attempts at recognition, but they fall short. The persistent lack of meaningful platforms for cooperation between traditional authorities and imposed local government structures in development, planning, and decision-making processes reveals an ongoing mindset that permeates governance systems. This systemic exclusion not only hampers the ability of traditional authorities to fulfil their roles effectively but also perpetuates the marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge systems

and practices [4]⁴ in rural development⁵, planning, and governance. The conflict between customary law, administered by traditional authorities, and imposed statutory planning instruments and legislation exemplifies the ongoing epistemic violence⁶ against African ways of knowing and being [5]. This imposition creates confusion and inconsistency in development, planning, and governance, particularly in critical areas such as land tenure, social dispute resolution, economic development, resource management, and livelihood.

Traditional authorities, often operating in rural areas deliberately underdeveloped by apartheid spatial planning, face immense challenges in contributing effectively to rural development [6]. The lack of resources and infrastructure in these areas is not incidental but a direct result of historical and ongoing structural violence against African communities [7]. As Ntsebeza rightly argues, the resurgence of traditional authorities' power in the post-apartheid era, particularly concerning land allocation, has profound implications for democratic governance and sustainable development in rural areas [7]. However, this resurgence must be understood not as a "return to tradition" but as a (re)clamation of Indigenous power structures that have always been present but suppressed.

The rapid growth of informal settlements and land disputes under traditional authorities' jurisdictions underscores the urgent need for inclusive rural planning and governance approaches. The resistance from traditional authorities to formal planning activities and the lack of cooperation from local authorities in planning and decision-making processes should be seen not as obstacles but as expressions of legitimate grievances against a system that continues to marginalise Indigenous knowledge and practices.

This study is anchored in three interrelated hypotheses that examine the intricate dynamics of traditional authority governance in post-apartheid South Africa. The first hypothesis asserts that the marginalisation of traditional authorities within contemporary governance frameworks is not merely an oversight but rather a systematic continuation of colonial epistemicide—the intentional dismantling of Indigenous knowledge systems. Building on this premise, the second hypothesis posits that the ongoing ambiguity in legal and policy frameworks surrounding traditional leadership is a deliberate strategy to maintain control over indigenous governance systems, thereby perpetuating colonial power structures in modern governance. The third hypothesis suggests a possible way forward, advocating for capacity-building initiatives for traditional authorities that can effectively bridge the divide between Indigenous and formal governance structures, provided these initiatives are developed with a clear decolonial awareness and recognition of Indigenous epistemologies. Collectively, these hypotheses inform the exploration of power dynamics, institutional relationships, and potential solutions in the realms of rural governance and development.

2. Background

This study proposes a Rural Development and Governance Initiative (RDGI)—which entails a collaboration between the state, specifically the Department of Land Reform and Rural Development (DLRRD) and the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA), and tertiary academic institutions. It contributes to both policy formulation and practical implementation in the realm of rural development planning and governance. It exposes how the apparent ambiguity in legal and policy frameworks governing traditional leadership is not merely an oversight but, as Mamdani argues, represents a deliberate continuation of colonial strategies to maintain control over Indigenous governance systems [8]. Building on this understanding, Ntsebeza demonstrates how this strategic ambiguity has perpetuated a system where traditional authorities often serve as intermediaries between the state and rural communities, much like during the colonial and apartheid eras [7]. The proposed RDGI framework directly challenges this pattern by

advocating for the direct empowerment of traditional authorities through capacity building and meaningful collaboration. The research also reveals how current policy frameworks often create what Claassens terms “artificial dichotomies” between traditional and modern governance systems [9]. By proposing a collaborative framework between DLRRD, CoGTA, and academic institutions, this study offers a practical pathway for bridging these divides while considering Indigenous governance structures.

A novel framework for understanding the relationship between state institutions and traditional authorities is introduced. Rather than viewing these as competing systems, it proposes what Nhlapo describes as a “complementary governance model” that recognises the unique strengths and legitimacy of both traditional and state institutions [10]. This study’s emphasis on the deliberate nature of policy ambiguity adds a crucial political dimension to what has often been treated as a purely administrative or technical challenge. This perspective helps explain why previous capacity-building initiatives have often failed to achieve lasting impact. This research thus provides both a conceptual framework and practical guidelines for developing more equitable and effective rural governance systems in South Africa. By explicitly acknowledging the deliberate nature of current policy ambiguities, it creates a foundation for more honest and productive dialogue about the future of traditional leadership in democratic South Africa. This contribution is particularly timely given ongoing debates about land reform and rural development in South Africa. As Ngcukaitobi notes, understanding the deliberate nature of policy ambiguities is crucial for developing more effective approaches to rural development that genuinely empower traditional authorities and their communities [11].

This study, therefore, outlines the conceptual framework for collaboration between DLRRD, CoGTA, other relevant departments, and selected academic institutions in implementing the RDGI. The initiative aims to equip traditional authorities with the tools and knowledge necessary to navigate the ever-growing contemporary complexities of rural development, planning, and governance effectively and in synergy with local authorities [12]. This study explores how capacity-strengthening initiatives for traditional authorities are able to foster more effective cooperation between Indigenous governance structures and formal government institutions in rural development and planning. Simultaneously proposing and interrogating the Rural Development and Governance Initiative RDGI, the research contributes to ongoing discourses about the role of traditional leadership in South Africa’s democratic landscape. It offers an insight into a potential pathway for a more inclusive and sustainable rural development and planning practice that centres on African epistemologies and ontologies while acknowledging the complementary roles of traditional and local authority systems.

As Maldonado-Torres contends, “As modern subjects, we breathe coloniality all the time and every day” [13], the RDGI must be cautiously approached. While it aims to enhance the participation of traditional authorities in rural development, planning, and governance, it must critically examine the underlying assumptions and power dynamics at play. Therefore, there is a need to ensure that the RDGI seeks to cooperate with Indigenous knowledge systems and governance practices and not attempt to assimilate traditional authorities into a fundamentally foreign development model. Its goal of equipping traditional authorities with knowledge and skills for proactive and effective engagement in rural development initiatives must be tested against questions about whose knowledge is privileged and what constitutes effective engagement. There is a need to ensure that the RDGI is not another form of epistemic violence, imposing external notions of development and governance on Indigenous systems.

3. Literature Review

Traditional authorities are recognised as Indigenous governance institutions that predate both colonial and apartheid rule. They embody systems of leadership, land stewardship, and community governance that have developed over generations. As Ntsebeza observes, these institutions are not simply administrative structures; rather, they represent holistic systems of governance that are deeply rooted in African philosophies of communal responsibility, spiritual ties to the land, and collective decision-making [7]. They act as custodians of customary law, cultural heritage, and communal land. However, as Claassens points out, the constitutional recognition of traditional authorities often perpetuates colonial-era distortions instead of restoring authentic Indigenous governance systems [9]. These institutions continue to navigate the complex tension between preserving cultural and traditional practices and adapting to modern governance requirements. Thus, it is essential to recognise traditional authorities not as relics of the past or mere administrative units but as dynamic institutions that embody alternative epistemologies of governance, land management, and community organisation—adaptable while still maintaining their core connection to Indigenous African values and knowledge systems.

3.1. *Historical Context of Traditional Authorities*

The discourse surrounding traditional authorities in South Africa's rural development and governance processes is shaped by the complex historical legacies of colonialism and apartheid. These oppressive systems sought to undermine Indigenous governance structures, leading to what Emeagwali terms epistemicide—the systematic erasure of African knowledge systems [2]. Despite this, traditional authorities have remained resilient, and their roles in governance persist, particularly in rural areas where they continue to be custodians of land, culture, and customary law [1]. However, post-apartheid attempts to integrate these structures into the formal governance framework have met with limited success, revealing deep-rooted tensions between Indigenous and imposed systems of governance.

The role of Indigenous governance structures in rural development, planning, and land administration has been subject to intense scrutiny and debate across the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region and Africa. This discourse, while extensive, often remains confined within foreign academic paradigms that do not fully grasp African ways of knowing and governing. Matondi examines the complex interplay between traditional leaders and imposed local government structures in land reclamation processes in Zimbabwe [14]. While this work highlights important tensions, it does not challenge the legitimacy of these dual governance systems, one rooted in Indigenous practices and the other in colonial impositions. Similarly, in Botswana, Sharma, cited in Tshitangoni and Francis, explores the evolving role of traditional authorities in natural resource management [15]. However, as argued by this study, the understanding of integrating Indigenous knowledge systems into formal conservation strategies reveals a persistent mindset that positions Indigenous knowledge as something to be incorporated into rather than forming the foundation of land and resource administration approaches.

3.2. *Power Dynamics in Rural Governance*

Traditional leadership was central to governance, land allocation, and conflict resolution in pre-colonial African societies [16]. As Oomen and Ntsebeza observe, introducing colonial governance weakened these systems by subjugating and manipulating traditional leaders to serve colonial objectives [5,7]. Under apartheid, these structures were further co-opted to maintain control over rural African populations, particularly through the Bantustan system, which distorted the role of traditional leaders into instruments of state

control. Post-1994, the new democratic dispensation sought to correct this historical wrong by recognising traditional authorities in the Constitution of South Africa. The Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act of 2013 further formalised this recognition by establishing a regulatory framework for traditional authorities' roles. However, the legislation fails to adequately address the tensions between traditional and local government entities, particularly in rural development, land administration, and planning.

The struggle for authority between traditional leadership and local government is well documented in South African literature [17,18]. These tensions arise primarily from the perceived exclusion of traditional leaders from planning and decision-making processes often dictated by statutory frameworks rooted in Western governance models. As Tshitangoni and Francis argue, this exclusion undermines traditional authorities' role and reinforces the marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge systems in governance and rural development [15]. The result is a contested space where traditional leaders and local government officials vie for legitimacy in the eyes of rural communities, leading to confusion and inconsistency in rural governance, particularly concerning land tenure and resource management.

3.3. Towards a Cooperative Governance Framework: The RDGI

In South Africa, a significant body of literature has emerged examining the challenges presented by the recognition of traditional leadership in the post-apartheid constitutional dispensation [1,3,5,15–20]. While this scholarship has contributed valuable insights, it often remains constrained by the legislative framework it seeks to critique, leading to (re)imagining alternatives to current governance structures a repetition without difference. Ntsebeza and Oomen offer critical analyses of the contradictions inherent in promoting democratic decentralisation and reinforcing the power of traditional authorities [5,19]. As such, this study contributes by questioning the fundamental assumptions underlying foreign notions of democracy and governance and how these may be at odds with African practices. On this note, recent scholarship, such as that of Koenane in his work titled "The Role and Significance of Traditional Leadership in the Governance of modern democratic South Africa", has begun to focus on the specific challenges of integrating traditional governance structures into formal systems [20]. Claassens and Cousins highlight the tensions between customary land rights and statutory planning frameworks [9,21]. While their calls for more nuanced and inclusive approaches are valuable from a customary land rights perspective, this study, through the proposed RDGI, takes it further by advocating for a radical (re)imagining of rural land management systems based on African ontologies.

Despite this growing body of literature, there remains a significant gap in research that blatantly centres on African ways of knowing and governing in rural development and planning. The proposed RDGI presents an opportunity to contribute to addressing this gap. This requires moving beyond simplistic notions of capacity-building that often reinforce power dynamics towards a model of mutual learning and knowledge exchange that recognises Indigenous governance systems' inherent value and wisdom. As such, this study contributes to this project by proposing and yet simultaneously critically interrogating the RDGI, not as a means of integrating traditional authorities into existing government structures, but as a potential pathway towards fundamentally (re)imagining rural development, planning, and governance in ways that centre African practices and ways of being. This approach demands new rural development models grounded in the lived experiences and aspirations of communities.

The proposed Rural Development and Governance Initiative (RDGI) seeks to address these challenges by fostering cooperation between traditional authorities and local government entities. The RDGI builds on the premise that sustainable rural development

cannot occur without the active participation of both governance structures. By equipping traditional authorities with the knowledge and skills necessary for proactive engagement, the RDGI aims to bridge the divide between Indigenous and statutory governance systems. However, as Meyer cautions, any such initiative must avoid imposing foreign models of governance that risk further marginalising Indigenous systems [19]. Instead, the RDGI should focus on mutual learning and consider the wisdom embedded in African governance practices. While much of the existing literature critiques the failures of integrating traditional leadership into formal governance frameworks, there is a growing call for the (re)imagining of rural development and planning systems that centre on African ontologies [22].

3.4. Decolonial Theoretical Framework

The application of decolonial theory in this study operates on multiple interconnected levels that directly inform both the research questions and methodological approach. The framework can be understood through three primary theoretical lenses. First, the research questions examine the relationship between traditional authorities and formal governance structures, which are fundamentally shaped by what Ndlovu-Gatsheni terms “epistemic freedom” [22,23]. This theoretical perspective guides the methodology by privileging Indigenous knowledge systems and local interpretations of governance. In the data collection process, this manifests through open-ended interview questions that allow traditional leaders to articulate their understanding of governance without imposing Western conceptual frameworks.

The analysis phase specifically looks for instances where Indigenous knowledge systems offer alternative approaches to rural development and governance. Second, the theoretical framework’s emphasis on colonial continuities in modern governance structures directly informs research questions about power dynamics between traditional authorities and local government. As Mamdani argues, contemporary governance challenges often reflect persistent colonial administrative structures [24]. This theoretical lens shapes the methodology through critical discourse analysis of policy documents and interview transcripts, specifically examining how colonial paradigms continue to influence current governance frameworks. The data analysis pays particular attention to what Ntsebeza identifies as institutional layering—where colonial administrative structures persist beneath surface-level democratic reforms [7]. Finally, the theoretical framework’s focus on the interaction between Indigenous and modern governance systems directly relates to research questions about capacity building and collaboration between traditional authorities and state institutions. Drawing on Cousin’s work on hybrid governance systems, the methodology incorporates a comparative analysis of traditional and statutory governance mechanisms [21]. The data analysis examines specific instances where these systems interact, conflict, or complement each other, particularly in land governance and rural development contexts. In practice, these theoretical frameworks inform the research methodology through interview design, data collection emphasising both formal and informal governance practices, and analysis frameworks that identify colonial continuities, Indigenous knowledge systems, and hybrid governance practices.

The analysis phase applies these theoretical frameworks by examining power dynamics through a decolonial lens, identifying instances where Indigenous knowledge systems offer alternative solutions, analysing how traditional authorities navigate between governance systems, and evaluating the impact of colonial legacies on current capacity-building initiatives. This theoretical grounding helps illuminate what Mbembe calls the “coloniality of power” in contemporary rural governance while also identifying pathways for more

equitable and inclusive governance systems that meaningfully incorporate Indigenous knowledge and practices [25].

4. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach examining the complex power dynamics between traditional leadership and local government structures in rural development, planning, and governance processes in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Adopting a purposive sampling method, the research examined conversations with traditional leaders and local government officials during development and planning initiatives related to land use management [26]. These initiatives were implemented in Tshikuwi in August 2017, Ha-Sinthumule in Makhado Local Municipality in October 2021, and Ga-Rammutla in Blouberg Local Municipality in March 2022.

In triangulating the preceding conversations, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in Ha-Makuya, located in the Mutale Local Municipality, with 4 key informants, 2 of whom are traditional leaders from the royal family of Ha-Makuya, during June and December 2024. (Table 1). The interviews comprised open-ended questions focusing on 3 main aspects: (i) the relationship between traditional and local authorities, (ii) the traditional authority's capacity and resources, and (iii) rural realities. The first aspect examined the complex interplay between traditional authorities and local government institutions, focusing on decision-making processes, perceptions, legal frameworks, and integrating Indigenous knowledge. The second aspect investigated traditional authorities' capacity and resource constraints, including financial and human resources, access to information, understanding of policies and planning instruments, and challenges in project implementation. The final aspect looked into rural–urban dynamics, exploring factors influencing rural settlement, the impact of urban unemployment on migration, emerging commuting patterns, and the role of traditional and cultural factors in settlement choices. This provided a thematic framework for analysing the data on the challenges and opportunities in local governance and rural development. The selection of research locations and participants adhered to a systematic framework designed to ensure representative data collection while maintaining methodological rigour. Research locations were determined through a multicriteria approach that considered four key dimensions: geographic distribution, governance structure, socio-economic characteristics, and historical context. The participant selection process applied role-specific criteria for three distinct groups: traditional authorities, local government officials, and key informants.

Table 1. Participants.

Target	Method	Case Study Area	Identifier ⁷	Number
Traditional authorities	Conversations	Tshikuwi—MLM	T-TA	2
		Ha-Sinthumule—MLM	HS-TA	3
		Ga-Rammutla—BLM	GR-TA	1
Local authorities		Makhado Local Municipality	MLM-LA	4
		Blouberg Local Municipality	BLM-LA	2
Key informant	Semi-structured interviews	Ha-Makuya—MLM	HM-KI	4
Total				16

Source: Author (2024).

The data analysis process in this study employed a multilayered approach to identify and interpret themes and patterns from the qualitative data collected across multiple case study sites in Limpopo Province. The analysis began with transcribing conversations and interviews, followed by a systematic coding process aligned with this study's decolonial theoretical framework. Initial coding was conducted through careful reading and re-reading of transcripts to identify recurring concepts, which were then grouped into preliminary categories. A second cycle of focused coding helped refine these categories into more specific themes, with particular attention paid to power dynamics, Indigenous knowledge systems, and governance relationships. The emerging themes were continuously compared across different data sources (conversations, interviews, and literature) to ensure consistency and theoretical saturation.

The analysis was structured around three main thematic areas: tensions between traditional and local authorities, capacity limitations, and impacts of ruralisation. This study identified manifest content (explicit statements and experiences) within each theme and latent content (underlying meanings and power dynamics). QDA Miner Lite version 3.0.7 software was used to organise and manage the coding process, allowing for systematic tracking of theme development and relationship mapping between different codes. The reliability of the thematic analysis was enhanced through regular cross-checking of coding decisions between researchers and maintaining detailed analytical memos throughout the process. Each identified theme was supported by multiple data points across different participant groups (T-TA, HS-TA, MLM-LA), and particular attention was paid to divergent or contradictory perspectives to ensure a comprehensive analysis. The interpretive approach examined how colonial legacies and power structures manifested in the relationships between traditional and local authorities. At the same time, the decolonial lens helped foreground Indigenous perspectives and knowledge systems in the analysis process.

Building on previous methods, this study critically analysed scholarly literature using a decolonial lens to understand power structures in knowledge production (Table 2). It focused on works from the Global South to centre marginalised perspectives in rural development and planning. The literature review covered traditional governance structures, rural development, and planning in South Africa. This study questioned the assumptions and applicability of proposed ideas to African contexts, contributing to decolonising academic knowledge production in this field.

Table 2. Key literature reviewed.

Literature	Critically Analyse
Ndlovu-Gatsheni [4]; Ndlovu & Ndlovu-Gatsheni [22]; Ndlovu-Gatsheni [23]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Decolonial theory - Ongoing struggles for epistemic freedom in Africa - Critique of colonial legacies' impact on governance - Newer perspectives on decoloniality and African governance - Indigenous systems and their interaction with modern governance
Meyer [19]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rural governance structures - Development policies - Challenges in aligning traditional and modern governance systems

Table 2. Cont.

Literature	Critically Analyse
Maldonado-Torres [13]; Quijano [27]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Concept of “coloniality of being” - Persistence of colonial structures in governance and society - Call for reimagining governance beyond colonial legacies - Colonial matrix of power
Koelble and Puma [17]; Ainslie and Kepe [18]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intersection of governance and development in rural areas - Focus on traditional authorities - Land governance - Indigenous knowledge systems
Sihlongonyane [1]; Oomen [5]; Ntsebeza [7]; Tshitangoni and Francis [15]; Tlhoale [16]; Koelble and Puma [17]; Ainslie and Kepe [18]; Koenane [20]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Role of traditional authorities - Tensions between traditional and local governance - Land governance - Exclusion of traditional systems from decision-making processes
Claassens [9]; Scoones [12]; Cousins [21]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rural land governance - Legal frameworks governing traditional authorities in South Africa - Land tenure and policy

Source: Author (2024).

All in all, this study employed multiple methodological strategies to ensure data reliability and representativeness. Through purposive sampling across 4 locations (Tshikuwi, Ha-Sinthumule, Ga-Rammutla, and Ha-Makuya) and participants across 2 municipalities (Makhado Local Municipality and Blouberg Local Municipality) in Limpopo Province, this research captured diverse perspectives from both traditional authorities and local government officials. Data triangulation was achieved through a combination of conversations with 16 participants (6 traditional authority members, 6 local authority representatives, and 4 key informants) and an in-depth semi-structured interview. In contrast, methodological triangulation was accomplished through the integration of multiple data collection methods, including conversations, interviews, and critical literature analysis. The reliability of findings was strengthened through thematic analysis guided by a framework examining rural governance complexities, while an interpretive approach helped unpack power dynamics between traditional leaders and local government officials. To ensure theoretical robustness, this study employed a decolonial lens in analysing scholarly literature, particularly focusing on perspectives from the Global South. The use of standardised identifiers (e.g., T-TA, HS-TA, MLM-LA) for participants across different case study areas enhanced data organisation and analysis consistency, while open-ended questions covering three main aspects (relationships between authorities, capacity and resources, and rural realities) provided a framework for data collection and analysis.

5. Results and Findings

This study’s findings were classified into three main themes: Tensions between Traditional and Local Authorities, Capacity Limitations of Traditional Authorities, and Ruralisation and the Evolving Role of Traditional Authorities (Table 3). These themes were essential for comprehending rural development and governance dynamics in post-colonial settings. Firstly, they illuminate the power struggles, marginalisation, and resource con-

straints experienced by traditional authorities, providing insights into the role of traditional governance in rural development, particularly in South African societies where historical legacies continue to influence contemporary governance structures. Secondly, the themes highlighted the complex interactions between traditional authorities and formal governance systems, emphasising conflicts arising from institutional overlaps with local governments. This underscores the significance of recognising Indigenous governance systems and questioning the legitimacy of externally imposed frameworks for rural planning through a decolonial lens. Lastly, the evolving role of traditional authorities in response to ruralisation and migration trends underscores the dynamic nature of rural governance. As urban pressures drive migration and reshape rural areas, traditional authorities are increasingly seen as guardians of cultural heritage and socio-economic development. This emphasises the role of traditional authorities in rural development and the resurgence of rural areas as sites of resistance and cultural preservation. Together, these themes provide a framework for understanding the challenges faced by traditional authorities in evolving rural development and governance contexts.

Table 3. Results and findings in three thematic areas.

Theme	Results: Conversations and Interview	Findings: Decolonial Perspective
1. Tensions between Traditional and Local Authorities	1.1 Institutional overlap engenders conflicts and power struggles. T-TA, HS-TA, GR-TA and HM-KI	The imposition of foreign local governance structures leads to clashes and power imbalances.
	1.2 Local government development planning approaches encroach upon traditional authority and decision-making power. T-TA, HS-TA and GR-TA	Traditional authorities are often marginalised and stripped of their decision-making power, perceived as obstacles to development and planning.
	1.3 Local authorities perceive traditional authorities as impediments to development and planning agendas. MLM-LA and BLM-LA	Emphasise the need for (re)think governance frameworks and recognise the legitimacy and authority of Indigenous governance systems in rural planning and development.
	1.4 Ambiguous and contradictory legal and policy frameworks govern traditional leadership roles in local governance. HM-KI	The perpetuation of the colonial presence.
	1.5 Traditional authorities experience exclusion from decision-making processes within local government systems. T-TA, HS-TA and GR-TA	
	1.6 Officials tend to impose their rural development and planning approaches onto Indigenous systems. T-TA, HS-TA, GR-TA and HM-KI T-TA, HS-TA, GR-TA and HM-KI	
	1.7 Indigenous knowledge contributions from traditional authorities are often overlooked or dismissed. T-TA, HS-TA, GR-TA and HM-KI	

Table 3. Cont.

Theme	Results: Conversations and Interview	Findings: Decolonial Perspective
2. Capacity Limitations of Traditional Authorities	2.1 Insufficient financial and human resources. T-TA and HS-TA	Administrative practices have left traditional authorities with limited resources and access to necessary information.
	2.2 Limited access to pertinent property and developmental information. T-TA, HS-TA, GR-TA and HM-KI	These limitations hinder their ability to fully engage in contemporary governance and apply land use and development policies effectively.
	2.3 Inadequate comprehension of policy and legislative frameworks. HM-KI	Advocate for policy reforms aimed at capacity building and resource allocation.
	2.4 Limited understanding of development and planning instruments and approaches. T-TA, HS-TA, and GR-TA	
	2.5 Limited understanding of technical regulations. T-TA, HS-TA, GR-TA and HM-KI	
	2.6 Challenges in budgeting, financial reporting, and implementation of development projects. T-TA, HS-TA, GR-TA and HM-KI	
3. Ruralisation and the Evolving Role of Traditional Authorities	3.1 Increased rural settlement due to high urban property costs. HM-KI	The socio-economic pressures from urbanisation and exclusion from land ownership exacerbate rural migration. No right to the city.
	3.2 Rural migration is driven by urban unemployment. HM-KI	Traditional authorities face a redefined role as custodians of rural spaces, with increasing responsibility for housing and cultural preservation.
	3.3 Emergence of rural–urban commuting patterns. HM-KI	Reimagine rural spaces as sites of resistance and cultural resurgence, where traditional authorities equally contribute sustainable, community-driven development pathways.
	3.4 Traditional and cultural lifestyles serve as pull factors for rural settlement. HM-KI	More and more people are valuing Indigenous epistemologies and ways of life.

Source: Author (2024).

Table 3 reveals significant commonalities across T-TA, HS-TA, and GR-TA municipalities, particularly in their experience of institutional challenges and capacity limitations. These three municipalities consistently demonstrate similar patterns of traditional authority exclusion from decision-making processes and face comparable difficulties in comprehending technical regulations and development instruments. A notable finding is that all studied municipalities, including HM-KI, share the challenge of Indigenous knowledge being overlooked in governance structures, suggesting a systemic issue in the integration of traditional leadership systems.

However, key differences emerge in the manifestation of these challenges. MLM-LA and BLM-LA stand apart in their explicit perception of traditional authorities as impediments to development, while this view is experienced rather than expressed by the traditional authorities in other municipalities. HM-KI appears to have unique insights into the ruralisation phenomenon and its implications for traditional authority roles, being the only municipality where these dynamics are extensively documented. The capacity limitations theme reveals that T-TA and HS-TA face more acute financial and human resource constraints compared with other municipalities, while HM-KI demonstrates a more comprehensive understanding of policy frameworks despite sharing other capacity

challenges. These variations suggest that while the fundamental challenges of traditional authority integration are consistent across municipalities, the specific manifestations and responses to these challenges differ based on local contexts and institutional arrangements. This indicates a need for nuanced, context-specific approaches to addressing traditional authority integration while acknowledging the common structural challenges across all municipalities.

Limitations

This study has some limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting its findings and conclusions. One notable limitation is the method of primary data collection, which predominantly reflected the perspectives of traditional authorities. While this approach offers valuable insights into Indigenous governance structures, it may introduce selection bias that could obscure a more thorough understanding of community dynamics. This concern is particularly significant given the diverse nature of rural governance systems and the complex interactions between formal and informal power structures. Moreover, methodological challenges arise from the necessity of cultural and traditional translation, which can affect the nuanced understanding of Indigenous governance concepts and the roles of traditional authorities. Additionally, the geographic focus on Limpopo, while providing in-depth insights, raises questions about the transferability of the findings to other rural contexts in different provinces, each with its unique historical, cultural, and socio-economic conditions. These limitations may influence the interpretation of this study's findings and conclusions, highlighting the need for future research to broaden stakeholder sampling, employ longitudinal study designs, enhance methodological triangulation, conduct comparative studies across various rural contexts, and develop more robust frameworks for analysing power dynamics within research processes.

6. Discussion

The government's formal recognition of traditional authorities represents a belated and often superficial acknowledgement of governance structures that have sustained communities for millennia. While contending to honour historical and cultural heritage, this tokenistic gesture fails to centre Indigenous knowledge systems and governance practices in rural development and planning processes [1]. There is a need to critically examine the notion of inclusion and participation within a governance framework that remains fundamentally colonially intact in its structure and orientation. Matondi contends that the persistent marginalisation of traditional authorities in decision-making processes is not an oversight but a manifestation of the ongoing epistemic violence that underpins current development paradigms [14].

Traditional authorities, as the stewards of communal lands entrusted by the people and the embodiment of Indigenous governance systems, face not just barriers but systemic oppression that silences their voices and delegitimises their authority [7]. The so-called ambiguous legal frameworks are, in reality, deliberate mechanisms of exclusion that privilege foreign notions of governance and development over African ways of knowing and being. The comprehension of traditional authorities' knowledge as insights and expertise to be contributed to existing development and planning frameworks reveals a deeply problematic power dynamic. It suggests that Indigenous knowledge should be selectively incorporated into a dominant foreign paradigm rather than forming the foundation upon which approaches to rural development should be built. The role of traditional authorities in land stewardship, conflict resolution, and cultural preservation is not vital—it is fundamental and inseparable from understanding sustainable community development. The

foreign conception of these as discrete areas of governance fails to grasp the holistic nature of African epistemologies and ontologies.

To move towards alternative rural development and planning, there is a need to radically (re)conceptualise their approach. This means not just removing barriers to cooperation but dismantling the colonial structures that created these barriers in the first place. It requires a fundamental shift in power relations, centring traditional authorities' epistemologies, practices, and governance systems in planning and decision-making processes. By rejecting the false dichotomy between traditional and modern governance and embracing the dynamic, adaptive nature of Indigenous systems, there can be hope for achieving progress in rural communities. This progress must be defined not by foreign development metrics but by local measures of community well-being, environmental stewardship, and cultural flourishing. As mentioned in the preceding section and subsequently discussed, the findings of this study were categorised into three themes, namely (i) Tensions between Traditional and Local authorities, (ii) Capacity Limitations of Traditional Authorities, (iii) Ruralisation and the Evolving Role of Traditional Authorities. These themes offered a framework for analysing and understanding the multifaceted role of traditional authorities in contemporary rural South Africa, highlighting the need to (re)conceptualise rural development and planning practices and recognise the validity of Indigenous knowledge systems in shaping sustainable and equitable futures.

6.1. Tensions Between Traditional and Local Authorities

The complex relationship between traditional and local authorities further complicates the integration of traditional authorities into rural development planning processes⁸. As highlighted by Simelane, the overlap and competition between these two institutions lead to conflicts, contradictions, and power struggles that undermine cooperative efforts [28]. Traditional authorities often express that the encroachment of local government's development planning approaches threatens their customary authority and decision-making power. At the same time, local authority officials perceive traditional authorities as obstacles to their development agenda. This tension is exacerbated by the ambiguous and sometimes contradictory legal and policy frameworks that govern the role of traditional leadership in local governance⁹. For instance, the South African Constitution (1996) recognises the institution of traditional leadership but does not delineate its functions and decision-making powers within the broader local government system. This ambiguity creates a space for competing claims to authority and legitimacy, hindering the development of effective partnerships between local and tribal authorities.

Often, officials tend to superimpose their understanding and approach to rural development and planning onto traditional authorities' Indigenous planning and governance systems. This disconnect stems from a lack of applicable recognition or appreciation for the African epistemologies traditional authorities hold. Scholars such as Todes and Turok have highlighted how this undermines the efficacy of traditional governance structures, leading to conflicts and inefficiencies in decision-making processes [29]. While officials have the technical skills and expertise, traditional authorities often possess deep-rooted knowledge of local ecosystems, customary land use practices, and community ontological dynamics. This knowledge is crucial for designing and implementing development initiatives tailored to rural communities' needs and realities [30]. However, when officials overlook or dismiss this Indigenous knowledge, favouring standardised development models, it can lead to implementing projects ill-suited to local contexts. As a result, these projects may not meet the community's needs, leading to suboptimal outcomes and community dissatisfaction. This disconnect between local authority development planning approaches and traditional knowledge undermines the potential for sustainable rural development practices [31].

6.2. Capacity Limitations of Traditional Authorities

Findings revealed the capacity limitations that some traditional authorities face in effectively engaging with decision-making processes in rural development and planning; this notion is seconded by Mudimeli [32]. These constraints are multifaceted, stemming from a lack of financial resources, limited access to pertinent property or developmental information, and a lack of clear comprehension of policy and legislative frameworks. As a result, many traditional authorities find themselves ill-equipped to navigate the intricate landscape of formal planning and development frameworks that guide rural development and management. One of the challenges traditional authorities encounter is their limited involvement and understanding of Integrated Development Planning (IDP) processes and Spatial Development Frameworks (SDF). Koma emphasises that this deficiency significantly hampers traditional authorities' ability to participate meaningfully in and contribute to the planning and development of rural spaces [33].

These plans and frameworks are crucial instruments for aligning local development goals with broader municipal, provincial, and national objectives, and the inability of traditional authorities to engage effectively in this process leads to a disconnect between community needs, available resources, and development strategies. This results in misaligned priorities and ineffective resource allocation, ultimately undermining the potential for sustainable rural development. Similarly, another critical area where traditional authorities often lack capacity is in their knowledge and application of land use management systems. Chakwizira et al. point out that many traditional authorities struggle to engage with complex spatial planning tools and Geographic Information Systems (GISs) [34]. This technical deficit hinders their ability to make informed decisions about land use and development in their areas. With a limited understanding of these tools, traditional authorities sometimes endorse developments incompatible with long-term sustainability goals or miss opportunities to optimise land use for community benefit.

As mentioned in the results, financial management is another crucial area where traditional authorities often fall short. Ntsebeza highlights that many traditional authorities lack the capacity to manage and account for financial resources effectively [7]. This deficiency leads to significant challenges in budgeting, financial reporting, and the implementation of development initiatives. Poor financial management results in the misallocation of resources, delays in implementation, and a lack of transparency that has eroded community trust¹⁰ and hindered rural development efforts. In addition, Mathonsi and Sithole observe that traditional authorities often struggle with planning, implementing, and monitoring development due to a lack of adequate skills and resources [35].

In dialogue with the local authorities, they pointed out that traditional authorities have a limited understanding of technical environmental regulations, particularly when navigating Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) processes. They add that this has led to unsustainable development practices, as traditional authorities sometimes allocate land within environmentally vulnerable areas. Sowman and Wynberg contend that such practices have the potential for legal complications and conflicts with environmental authorities [36]. These capacity limitations collectively undermine the ability of traditional authorities to effectively communicate and cooperate with local authorities, often leading to misunderstandings, conflicts, and missed opportunities for synergistic partnerships. Consequently, insights that traditional authorities could bring are often untapped, hindering the potential for more inclusive and sustainable rural development [31].

It is evident from these findings that there is a gap in which the proposed RDGI can contribute to enhancing the role of traditional authorities in rural development and planning processes. However, it should be noted that this limited capacity does not apply to all traditional authorities in South Africa. The KwaZulu, Bakwena, and Royal Baf-

keng traditional authorities are notable exceptions, demonstrating significant capacity in governance and development initiatives. In the case of KwaZulu-Natal, more than 30% of landholdings are under traditional authorities and administered in trust by the Ingonyama Trust Board (ITB) [37]. According to the ITB's 2019/2020 Annual Report, the trust administers approximately 2.8 million hectares of land on behalf of the Zulu King, representing about 29.67% of the land area in KwaZulu-Natal [37]. The ITB serves as a key facilitator of development on traditionally administered land, and many community members often praise the efficiency of traditional authorities in this area. The Royal Bafokeng Nation in North West Province provides another compelling example of a well-resourced traditional authority. Through royalties earned from platinum mining on their land, the Royal Bafokeng Nation has been able to invest significantly in community development. According to a study by Mnwana and Capps, the Royal Bafokeng Administration spent approximately R3 billion on community projects between 2000 and 2012, including education, healthcare, and infrastructure investments [38]. Similarly, the Bakwena ba Mogopa, again in the North West Province, have leveraged mining royalties to fund community service delivery projects. A 2018 report by the South African Human Rights Commission noted that the Bakwena ba Mogopa community had used mining revenues to establish schools, clinics, and other essential infrastructure [39].

Preceding highlights the heterogeneity among traditional authorities regarding their capacity and resources. As Claassens argues, this variation in capacity and resources among traditional authorities has significant implications for equitable rural development and governance across South Africa [9]. It underscores the need for nuanced, context-specific approaches to capacity building and collaboration with traditional authorities in rural development initiatives. Hence, the probing approach was adopted by the RDGI, as discussed in Section 6.1.

6.3. Ruralisation and the Evolving Role of Traditional Authorities

The emergence of urban–rural migration, or ruralisation, is redefining and restructuring rural spaces in South Africa, presenting both challenges and opportunities for rural development planning and governance. This trend, which challenges the traditional rural-to-urban migration pattern, is driven by high urban living costs and limited affordable land in cities [40]. As a result, initiatives are urgently needed to empower traditional authorities to participate actively in planning and decision-making processes related to rural development. The ruralisation phenomenon is reshaping rural demographics, socio-economic structures, and spatial patterns¹¹. Potts argues that this counter-urbanisation trend is partly driven by the failure of urban areas to provide adequate economic opportunities and living conditions for all residents [41]. This influx of urban migrants to rural areas creates new demands on rural infrastructure, services, and governance systems. According to Statistics South Africa, between 2016 and 2021, approximately 280,000 people moved from urban to rural areas annually, representing about 0.5% of the urban population [42].

This demographic shift is redefining rural spaces in several ways. The influx of urban migrants is intensifying competition for land and natural resources in rural areas, potentially leading to conflicts over land use and ownership [43]. Urban migrants often bring new skills, entrepreneurial ideas, and investment capital to rural areas, potentially diversifying local economies [44]. Integrating urban migrants into rural communities alters social structures and cultural norms, necessitating new social cohesion and community development approaches. The growing rural population also puts additional strain on often already limited rural infrastructure and services, including healthcare, education, and utilities [45]. Given these changes, the RDGI aims to equip traditional authorities to participate actively in decision-making processes related to rural development and

planning. With their deep understanding of local contexts and traditional governance systems, traditional authorities are uniquely positioned to mediate between the needs of long-term rural residents and new urban migrants. As mentioned, Mudimeli pointed out that traditional authorities often face significant capacity limitations that hinder their effective engagement in formal planning and development processes [32].

Therefore, this study argues that several key initiatives are needed to contribute to addressing these challenges and harnessing the potential benefits of ruralisation. These include targeted capacity-building programs for traditional authorities focusing on integrated rural development planning, land use management, and project management [33]. Establishing formal platforms for cooperation between traditional and local authorities is crucial to ensure inclusive decision-making processes. However, while providing traditional authorities with adequate financial and technical resources is essential for their effective engagement in rural development and planning, as the findings reveal, there is a need for legislative and policy reforms to clarify and strengthen the role of traditional authorities in rural development processes; particularly in the context of changing rural demographics [35]. The ruralisation trend is significantly reshaping rural spaces in South Africa, necessitating a (re)imagining of rural development approaches. Empowering traditional authorities to participate actively in decision-making processes is crucial for ensuring that rural development and planning initiatives are proactive to the needs of long-term rural residents and new urban migrants.

7. Framework on Rural Development and Governance

The Department of Land Reform and Rural Development (DLRRD) has acknowledged the central role that traditional authorities play in sustaining and developing rural communities [3]. Ainslie and Kepe argue that Indigenous governance structures, deeply rooted in African worldviews and practices, have been the custodians of lands and communal ways of living long before the imposition of colonial borders and governance systems [18]; this notion is unequivocally supported by Koenane [20]. Their influence and wisdom, derived from centuries of lived experience and intergenerational knowledge transfer, are invaluable assets that have been systematically undermined and marginalised by colonial and apartheid regimes [20]. The multifaceted role of traditional authorities in rural development encompasses land stewardship, conflict resolution, and the preservation of cultural heritage—aspects that are inseparable from African epistemologies.

While the post-apartheid government has made gestures towards recognising traditional authorities¹², as mandated by the constitution, the practical implementation, in this case of recognition, as well as the development, planning, and governance, remains vague and deeply problematic. The persistent challenges in translating this recognition into meaningful cooperation and decision-making processes reveal a mindset that permeates governance structures, hindering the engagement of traditional authorities in shaping rural futures.

The RDGI represents a significant paradigm shift in approaches to capacity building in South Africa's complex and diverse rural landscape. This framework is intended to contribute to addressing the wide-ranging challenges traditional authorities face as they navigate the complicated terrain of rural development and governance. By bridging the gap between traditional and local authorities, the RDGI aims to ensure that the realities of contemporary rural development planning are responsive to the unique perspectives and needs of diverse rural communities. This initiative recognises the critical role that traditional authorities play in mediating the needs of long-term residents and new urban migrants. The aim is to strengthen them through targeted capacity-building programs and

institutional support. Through this approach, the RDGI strives to achieve more inclusive and sustainable rural development outcomes across South Africa's diverse rural areas.

The objectives of the RDGI include the development of Short Learning Programs (SPLs) and improving capacity in rural development, planning, and governance. The focus is on empowerment and the involvement of multiple interest groups [7,46]. Integrating Indigenous knowledge systems and traditional practices into the learning program will reflect a growing recognition of the value of local knowledge for sustainable development [47,48]. According to Cousins, effective rural development in South Africa requires a deep understanding of the complex interplay between traditional governance structures and modern democratic institutions [21]. This perspective highlights the importance of emphasising context-specific approaches within the RDGI.

Furthermore, capacity-building initiatives in rural areas should not only focus on technical skills but also on fostering leadership skills and encouraging participatory decision-making processes. This aligns with the RDGI's objective to improve capacity in rural development and governance. The framework's emphasis on collaboration is consistent with the findings of Beinart and Delius, which highlight the critical role of engagement from traditional and local authorities in addressing the challenges faced by rural communities in post-apartheid South Africa [49]. The proposed RDGI represents a significant contribution to rural development, planning, and governance in South Africa. By adopting a nuanced, context-specific approach that considers the dynamics and complexities of traditional governance systems and the diverse realities of rural communities, the RDGI has the potential to drive significant change in rural areas. However, further research is needed to assess the long-term impact of this approach and its potential for scalability in different rural contexts in South Africa and beyond.

7.1. Probing Approach: Understanding Lived Realities

South African scholars have deliberated on the probing approach and contextualised it locally. For example, Theron and Mchunu argue that such an approach is crucial to understanding the realities of rural communities and ensuring that development initiatives respond to local needs [50]. Building on this, Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues for a decolonial approach to understanding rural realities and that traditional knowledge systems and local epistemologies must be at the heart of any development initiative [51]. He contends that the lived experiences of African people must be the starting point of any meaningful development discourse.

In the context of traditional authorities, Ntsebeza emphasises the importance of understanding the complex power dynamics within rural communities [7]. He argues that any attempt to understand rural governance must consider the historical legacies of apartheid and colonialism and the contemporary realities of democratic South Africa [7]. Cousins further emphasises the need for a nuanced understanding of land tenure systems in traditional areas, noting that simplistic dichotomies between traditional and formal land rights obscure the complex realities [21]. This highlights the importance of a probing approach that can uncover this complexity. By working directly with communities and traditional authorities, the RDGI has the potential to uncover the nuanced realities of each traditional land, enabling the adaptation of capacity-building programs that address specific local priorities. This is supported by Mashele and Qobo, who argue that effective rural development requires a deep understanding of local contexts, power structures, and social dynamics [52].

This probing approach uses participatory mapping, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews with community members and traditional leaders. These methods, advocated by Boonzaaier, can help uncover the complex web of social relationships, cultural

practices, and economic activities that shape rural life [53]. By incorporating these insights from South African scholars, the probing approach of the RDGI can ensure a more nuanced, contextual, and effective strategy for capacity building and rural development in areas under traditional authority.

7.2. Incorporating Diverse Perspectives

The framework's recognition of diverse perspectives in spatial interpretation is significant in the South African context, where the legacy of apartheid spatial planning continues to influence rural development trajectories [6]. By incorporating these different interpretations into its framework, the RDGI recognises the plurality of rural realities and the need for contextualised development approaches. This is consistent with the post-apartheid imperative of spatial justice as expressed in the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA) of 2013. Hendricks and Pithouse argue that understanding different spatial interpretations is crucial to addressing the persistent inequalities in rural South Africa [54]. They note that the apartheid legacy of spatial segregation and unequal development continues to shape rural landscapes and requires development approaches that recognise and respond to different local realities.

Building on this, Ngcukaitobi emphasises the importance of recognising Indigenous land rights and spatial concepts in rural development initiatives [55]. He argues that incorporating African customary law and traditional spatial concepts is essential for creating inclusive and sustainable rural development models. Cousins further highlights the complexity of land tenure systems in rural South Africa, noting that diverse and overlapping systems of land rights and use exist, often in tension with formal planning frameworks [21]. This underscores the need for the RDGI to accommodate multiple perspectives on land use and spatial organisation. The importance of integrating traditional knowledge systems into spatial planning is emphasised by Mkhize, who argues that Indigenous spatial concepts and land use practices often embody sustainable principles that can inform more resilient rural development strategies [56]. This aligns with the RDGI's commitment to incorporating diverse perspectives. Todes further emphasises the need for flexible and adaptive planning approaches in rural areas, stating that rigid spatial planning models often fail to capture the dynamic and diverse nature of rural livelihoods and settlement patterns [57]. This supports the RDGI's recognition of varied spatial interpretations.

On the other hand, Maharaj argues for an alternative approach to spatial planning, emphasising the need to challenge dominant foreign spatial concepts and incorporate African spatial epistemologies in rural development initiatives [58]. This perspective reinforces the RDGI's commitment to diverse spatial interpretations. The RDGI aims to foster more inclusive and culturally appropriate approaches to rural development and planning by incorporating these diverse perspectives. Parnell and Pieterse argue that recognising and valuing diverse spatial interpretations is crucial for creating development strategies that resonate with local communities and promote spatial transformation [59].

7.3. Addressing Misunderstandings and Empowering Traditional Authorities

A critical component of the proposed RDGI is its focus on addressing misunderstandings surrounding legislation such as SPLUMA¹³ [60]. The perception among many traditional authorities that SPLUMA threatens their powers and land ownership rights highlights the complex interplay between traditional and statutory governance systems in South Africa. The RDGI aims to clarify the intentions behind such legislation by providing targeted training and guidance, potentially reducing conflicts and fostering more harmonious relationships between traditional and local authorities. Mathebula contends that the perceived threat of SPLUMA to traditional authority has created significant barriers to

its implementation in rural areas, necessitating focused efforts to bridge the gap between statutory and customary land governance systems [61]. Sibanda further elaborates on the complexities of implementing SPLUMA in areas under traditional authority, noting that the Act's provisions for municipal planning often conflict with traditional land allocation practices, creating a need for careful negotiation and capacity building [62]. This underscores the RDGI's crucial role in facilitating understanding and cooperation.

Ntlama further highlights the constitutional imperative of recognising traditional leadership while promoting democratic governance, stating that the empowerment of traditional authorities must be pursued to balance their constitutional recognition with the principles of democratic local governance [63].

Effectively implementing SPLUMA in rural areas requires ongoing engagement and negotiation between municipal authorities and traditional leaders. There is potential for SPLUMA to enhance the role of traditional authorities if properly understood and implemented; SPLUMA provides opportunities for traditional authorities to participate in spatial planning processes, potentially strengthening their role in local development. The RDGI contributes to more effective and inclusive rural development, planning, and governance by addressing these misunderstandings and empowering traditional authorities.

7.4. Collaboration with Local Universities

Collaboration with local universities is a significant strength of the RDGI; the intention is to collaborate with at least one university from each of the nine provinces of South Africa. This partnership approach aligns with the triple helix model of innovation, which emphasises the importance of university-industry-government relationships in knowledge production and dissemination (refer to Figure 1) [64]. By leveraging the expertise and resources of these institutions, the initiative can enhance its reach and impact while also contributing to the generation of context-specific knowledge on rural development, planning, and governance. Universities can play a crucial role in addressing the complex challenges of rural development, bridging the gap between academic knowledge and local realities [65]. The importance of transdisciplinary approaches in such collaborations requires effective engagement with rural development issues and the integration of diverse disciplinary perspectives and methodologies.

Ntshoe emphasises the role of universities in promoting social justice through engaged scholarship, stating that university-community partnerships have the potential to contribute to addressing historical inequalities in rural areas through knowledge co-creation and targeted interventions [66]. By incorporating these collaborations with local universities, the RDGI aims to enhance the capacity for knowledge generation, dissemination, and practical application. As Swartz et al. contend, strategic partnerships between universities, government agencies, and rural communities are able to create synergies for addressing complex development challenges [67]. Pragmatically, this collaboration involves joint research projects, student internships in rural development initiatives, collaborative curriculum development for capacity-building programs, and establishing rural development research centres within universities. By fostering these partnerships, the RDGI initiative aims to create a robust ecosystem for knowledge exchange and innovation in rural development, planning, and governance.

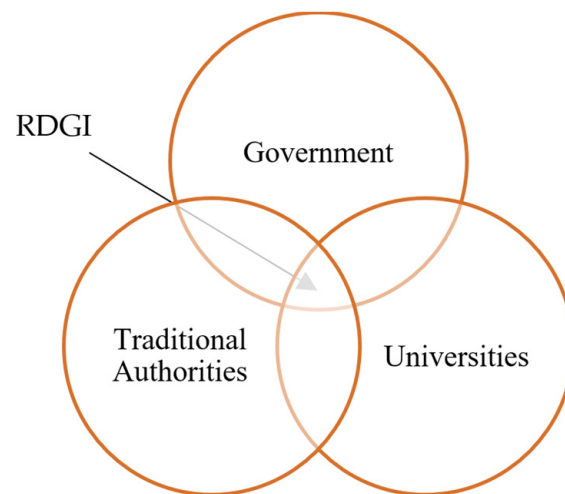


Figure 1. Triple helix model of the Rural Development and Governance Initiative (RDGI). Source: Adapted from Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff [64]. University: Engages in research, education, and knowledge dissemination. In this context, universities also play a role in studying traditional authorities and their impact on society, as well as in developing policies or programs that bridge modern governance with traditional values. Traditional Authority: Represents established societal structures that influence community norms, behaviours, and decision-making processes. Traditional authorities interact with universities to integrate modern knowledge with traditional wisdom and collaborate with governments to ensure policies consider and incorporate local traditions and values. Government: Regulates society, enacts policies, and provides public services. Governments work with universities to understand the role of traditional authorities in society and collaborate with both entities to develop inclusive policies that balance modern governance with traditional values.

8. Theoretical Connotations and Policy Applications

The intersection of decolonial theory and rural development presents a critical framework for reimagining governance structures beyond the colonial matrix of power. The colonial matrix of power, as conceptualised by Quijano [27], continues to manifest in contemporary rural governance through what Maldonado-Torres terms the “coloniality of being [13]”. This perpetuation occurs through seemingly neutral development frameworks that privilege Western epistemologies while marginalising Indigenous knowledge systems. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues, this epistemic violence extends beyond mere policy decisions into the very structure of how rural development is conceived and implemented [51]. The persistence of colonial power structures in rural governance manifests through epistemological hierarchies that privilege Western technical knowledge over Indigenous wisdom in rural development planning, institutional asymmetries that subordinate traditional authorities to imposed local government structures, and resource distribution patterns that systematically underfund traditional governance systems.

To achieve genuine decolonisation in rural development policy, several specific strategies emerge from decolonial scholarship. Policy formulation must begin with what De Sousa Santos terms “cognitive justice”—the equal recognition of different ways of knowing [68]. This requires the integration of Indigenous knowledge systems into formal planning frameworks, recognition of traditional decision-making processes as legitimate governance mechanisms, and development of hybrid knowledge systems that bridge Indigenous and technical expertise. The reconstruction of governance institutions must follow what Mignolo calls “delinking” from colonial matrices of power, necessitating the creation of co-governance structures where traditional authorities have equal decision-making power, development of culturally grounded planning instruments that reflect

local epistemologies, and implementation of resource allocation mechanisms that prioritise traditional governance systems [69].

Drawing from Ndlovu-Gatsheni's concept of "epistemic freedom", several specific implementation strategies emerge for translating theoretical frameworks into concrete actions [22,23]. Policy framework reconstruction requires the development of Indigenous-centred planning legislation that recognises traditional authority jurisdiction, the creation of multilingual policy documents that preserve Indigenous conceptual frameworks, and the implementation of community-driven development indicators that reflect local values and aspirations. Institutional transformation necessitates the establishment of traditional authority capacity-building programs rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems, the creation of dedicated funding streams for traditional governance structures, and the development of collaborative decision-making mechanisms that consider Indigenous protocols. Cultural heritage integration demands recognition of traditional land management practices in formal planning frameworks, integration of Indigenous ceremonial and cultural spaces in development plans, and protection of sacred sites and cultural landscapes through formal legal mechanisms.

The evaluation of decolonial initiatives must itself be decolonised. Drawing from Smith's work on decolonial methodologies, specific metrics should include the degree of Indigenous knowledge integration in rural development planning, level of traditional authority autonomy in decision-making, extent of resource allocation to traditional governance systems, and preservation and enhancement of Indigenous cultural practices [70]. These metrics provide concrete measures for assessing progress while remaining grounded in decolonial principles.

The decolonisation of rural development planning and governance requires more than surface-level policy changes. It demands a fundamental restructuring of power relations, knowledge systems, and institutional frameworks. Through specific pathways in policy formulation, institutional design, and cultural integration, decolonisation becomes possible, though it remains a complex and ongoing process. The success of these initiatives depends on sustained commitment to epistemic justice, institutional transformation, and cultural preservation, guided by decolonial principles and measured through Indigenous-centred evaluation frameworks.

9. Conclusions

This study contributes to understanding traditional authorities' role in South Africa's rural development and governance landscape. Through a critical decolonial lens, findings have revealed the persistent colonial legacies embedded within current institutional frameworks while highlighting pathways toward more inclusive and culturally responsive governance systems. The research demonstrates how the tensions between traditional and local authorities, as evidenced in all studied municipalities, reflect deeper epistemological conflicts rather than mere administrative challenges. The systematic exclusion of traditional authorities from decision-making processes, coupled with the dismissal of Indigenous knowledge systems, perpetuates what Maldonado-Torres terms the "coloniality of being" within rural governance structures [13]. This marginalisation is particularly evident in the findings from T-TA, HS-TA, and GR-TA municipalities, where traditional authorities consistently report exclusion from crucial development planning processes.

The proposed Rural Development and Governance Initiative (RDGI) is a potential intervention to contribute to addressing these systemic challenges. However, findings suggest that its effectiveness will depend on its ability to transcend conventional capacity-building approaches that often reinforce colonial power dynamics. The initiative's success hinges on its capacity to facilitate genuine epistemic dialogue between traditional and

formal governance systems, particularly in addressing the capacity limitations identified across all studied municipalities.

This study reveals a significant trend toward ruralisation, which is documented particularly well in HM-KI and presents both challenges and opportunities for traditional authorities. This phenomenon, driven by urban economic pressures and cultural factors, necessitates a (re)conceptualisation of rural spaces not as peripheral to urban centres but as sites of cultural resistance and renaissance. The varying manifestations of challenges across municipalities, from acute resource constraints in T-TA and HS-TA to more nuanced policy implementation issues in HM-KI, underscore the need for context-specific interventions while addressing common structural barriers.

This study's limitations, particularly regarding stakeholder representation and geographic scope, point to opportunities for future research. Nevertheless, findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of rural governance in post-colonial contexts and offer practical insights for policy reform. The RDGI framework must be implemented with careful attention to power dynamics and Indigenous epistemologies to avoid reproducing colonial structures under the guise of development. In conclusion, this research advances theoretical and practical understanding of traditional authorities' role in rural development. It challenges conventional approaches to capacity building and governance while proposing concrete pathways toward more equitable and culturally responsive rural development practices. Future research should focus on expanding the geographic scope of analysis and developing more robust frameworks for evaluating power dynamics within rural governance systems.

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Notes

- ¹ Within South Africa's post-1994 democratic framework, governance refers to the intricate interplay between traditional leadership structures and formal government institutions in decision-making, resource allocation, and development planning. As described by Sihlongonyane and reinforced in this work [1], it encompasses both Indigenous systems of leadership and imposed local government structures, highlighting the tensions and potential for cooperation between these different forms of authority in managing communal resources and directing development initiatives.
- ² Emeagwali delivers that "Epistemicide" is the deliberate destruction of Indigenous knowledge systems—it is a central mechanism of colonial domination. This form of knowledge annihilation is integral to the colonial project, ensuring the suppression and marginalisation of local epistemologies while promoting foreign scientific paradigms as universal [2].
- ³ The Department of Land Reform and Rural Development (DLRRD) has acknowledged the central role those traditional authorities play in sustaining and developing rural communities [3].
- ⁴ Ndlovu-Gatsheni echoes that the marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge systems in the educational and development policies of post-colonial states reflects a continuation of colonial attitudes that regard Indigenous knowledge as inferior or irrelevant to modernity and progress. This exclusion not only undermines the cultural integrity of Indigenous communities but also limits the potential for diverse and contextually relevant approaches to sustainable development [4].
- ⁵ In the South African context, rural development refers to the complex process of improving the quality of life and economic well-being of communities in areas that were deliberately underdeveloped during apartheid through spatial planning policies [5]. This work frames rural development as going beyond mere infrastructure and service delivery to include the recognition and integration of Indigenous knowledge systems, traditional governance structures, and local cultural practices in planning and implementation processes.
- ⁶ Coined by Spivak, epistemic violence highlights how dominant foreign epistemologies have systematically marginalised or silenced other ways of knowing [6].

- 7 These identifiers are abbreviations used in the results section to distinguish participants and their contributions.
- 8 The complex relationship between traditional governance structures and local authorities is not a mere complication but a fundamental manifestation of the colonial-apartheid project in rural spaces.
- 9 The ambiguity in legal and policy frameworks governing traditional leadership is not an oversight but a deliberate strategy to maintain colonial power structures excluding Indigenous governance.
- 10 The issue of illegal land allocation by traditional authorities has been the subject of legal and administrative investigations. This practice involves traditional leaders allocating land to residents, sometimes in exchange for payment, without the necessary approval from local communities. Such measures have even led to illegal occupation of municipal land, as has been carried out in Tshikota, becoming a significant challenge for municipalities (<https://limpopomirror.co.za/articles/news/45826/2018-02-03/we-are-erecting-shacks-on-our-land>, accessed on 19 November 2024).
- 11 This phenomenon is more noticeable and prevalent in Venda within the Limpopo province. The preceding phenomenon was elaborated during the interview with the traditional leader of Ha-Makuya. He contended that while this phenomenon may have gained recognition and momentum in the past two decades, it is a phenomenon that has been in Venda for many years, even during the Venda Republic years, as the motto states “Shumela Venda”, translated to English as “Work for Venda”, meaning one goes to the city to work, but home remains Venda.
- 12 Post-apartheid, several laws on traditional institutions and land ownership were passed, which strengthened traditional authorities but confused them. These laws included the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework (TLGF) Act of 2003, the Provincial Traditional Leadership Act of 2005, and the Traditional Courts Bill of 2008. The TLGF had arguably given the traditional authorities more powers than they had under apartheid as they effectively consolidated the traditional jurisdictions created during the formation of the homelands.
- 13 The need for the empowerment of traditional authorities is also emphasised by Khunou, who argues that traditional leaders often lack the technical knowledge and resources to effectively engage with complex legislative frameworks such as SPLUMA [60].

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