

Leaving No One Behind: Planning for Inclusive Resilience in Marginalised Communities

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1 ABSTRACT

Marginalised communities experience a higher level of impacts from climate change and disasters and typically have limited access to resources and support to recover and rebuild. Globally, inclusive resilience planning has become crucial in mitigating these inequalities and ensuring that no one is left behind. Although various tools exist for implementing inclusive resilience in South Africa's planning, municipalities face challenges in integrating climate change adaptation into local planning. To address these challenges, this paper explores inclusive resilience planning strategies to alleviate residents' hardships and ensure that no one is left behind in the face of climate change and other shocks. Building on this, the study employed a qualitative research approach to analyse the lived experiences and viewpoints of the residents. The study results highlight that marginalised communities are diverse, emphasising that each community has specific needs and challenges that must be considered in resilience planning. Typically, spatial planning practices employ the top-down approach rather than incorporating marginalised communities. Current power imbalances and social exclusion can exacerbate inequities, and resilience planning frameworks often overlook them. The study recommends that to promote inclusive resilience in marginalised communities, policymakers must prioritise community-based methods, address power imbalances and social exclusion, incorporate marginalised communities into inclusive resilience planning strategies, and prioritise the voices and viewpoints of residents. The study seeks to contribute to both policy and academia by translating the global LNOB principle into a context-specific framework for flood resilience in rural South Africa, enhancing equitable participation and minimising vulnerability.

Keywords: Inclusive Resilience, Marginalised Communities, climate change, inclusive planning, urbanism

2 INTRODUCTION

The principle of Leaving No One Behind (LNOB) is vital to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda, highlighting a worldwide devotion to equity in development results (United Nations, 2015; Gupta and Vegelin, 2023). Essentially, LNOB requires planned efforts to prioritise the needs of the improvised and most marginalised communities, ensuring that development processes and results benefit all members of society (Ubillus and van Ongevalle, 2024). This principle promotes the need to identify and solve structural inequities that exacerbate vulnerability in the context of climate change in order to implement resilience-building solutions. Marginalised communities experience a greater level of impacts from climate change and disasters and typically have limited access to resources and support to recover and rebuild (Mendis et al., 2023). As a result, LNOB necessitates not only inclusive development rhetoric but also the meaningful integration of marginalised communities into the resilience planning processes. This requirement is especially important in South Africa, where the legacy of apartheid spatial planning continues to produce deeply ingrained inequalities, with poor and vulnerable communities extremely exposed to climate-related disaster risks (Parnell and Pieterse, 2014; Maranga and Dorasamy, 2026). Due to their continued development in underserved and environmentally risky places, historically marginalised communities are particularly exposed to the problems posed by climate-related disasters (Smith et al., 2022). Climate change is intensifying extreme weather patterns, leading to heavy rainfall, contributing to catastrophic disasters, causing misery, and disrupting both urban and rural communities (Raphela, 2025). In support of this view, the United Nations reports that floods accounted for 43% of all natural disasters that occurred globally between 1995 and 2015. Among those who experienced any natural catastrophe, these occurrences affected over half (56%) and resulted in the deaths of over a quarter (26%) (Abdrabo et al.,

2020). These trends highlight that flood risks and damages are increasing in frequency and severity, thereby compounding existing inequalities and increasing community vulnerability. In South Africa, residents are increasingly settling in flood-prone areas, especially among the poor and marginalised residents facing growing exposure and risks due to both environmental and socio-political factors (Dube et al., 2021; Raphela, 2025). In conclusion, the increasing impacts of climate change are making floods more frequent and severe, increasing community vulnerability, and necessitating urgent, adaptable solutions to protect both urban and rural residents.

Rural settlements in developing countries are increasingly vulnerable to high flood risks due to heavy runoff or an increase in water levels in a specific location that exceeds the environment's capacity to absorb water (Ampofo et al., 2024; Munyai et al., 2021). Unfortunately, South Africa stands out as one of the developing countries that frequently suffer from the devastating effects of climate change-related calamities, notably heavy rainfall-induced flooding (Raphela, 2025). Provinces in South Africa, such as Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal, North West, and the Eastern Cape, are disproportionately affected by more extensive flood risks due to a combination of geographic and government-related weaknesses (Munyai et al., 2021). This spatial marginalisation, combined with poor municipal capacity to enforce climate change adaptation strategies, increases the vulnerability of these communities and exposure to flood risks and undermines the practical application of LNOB in resilience planning (van der Berg, 2023). Globally, inclusive resilience planning has become crucial in mitigating these inequalities and ensuring that no one is left behind (Makamanzi, 2025). Although frameworks and tools exist for inclusive resilience planning, current strategies in South Africa are weakly tailored to address the intersecting challenges of environmental hazard, social vulnerability, and inequalities. Specifically, there is a lack of locally grounded, participatory tools that incorporate LNOB principles into flood resilience approaches for rural communities, and this highlights a significant research and practice gap. To address this gap, this paper aims to create a practical, grounded approach to flood resilience that actively involves marginalised communities and addresses social, spatial, and environmental inequalities. The study seeks to contribute to both policy and academia by translating the global LNOB principle into a context-specific framework for flood resilience in rural South Africa, enhancing equitable participation and minimising vulnerability.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Leaving No One Behind, inclusive development, and climate change

The principle of LNOB, embedded within the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, represents a normative commitment to equity that is particularly urgent in the context of climate change (United Nations, 2023). Although the 2030 Agenda focuses on sustainable development, it simultaneously advances inclusive development, allowing space for achieving social, ecological, and relational inclusiveness (Gupta and Vegelin, 2023). This commitment is reinforced by the pledge to leave no one behind and to reach the furthest behind first (United Nations, Gupta and Vegelin, 2023). Consequently, the conceptualisation of inclusive development of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) builds on respecting human rights and achieving social justice, which are the groundwork for the 17 goals and 169 targets of the SDGs (Magdalena, 2023). While LNOB emerged within border sustainable development discourse, its relevance has become increasingly pronounced as climate change intensifies social, economic, and environmental inequalities (Taratori and Comim, 2025). Marginalised communities frequently face higher exposure to hazards such as floods, droughts, and extreme heat; greater sensitivity due to limited financial resources and institutional support (Naess et al., 2021). The marginalised communities, particularly in rural and flood-prone areas, are often exposed to the highest level of climate risk while possessing the least adaptive capacity.

LNOB provides not only a moral framework but a governance imperative that requires climate policies to prioritise structurally vulnerable populations rather than pursue uniform adaptation strategies. It calls for a climate change policy that prioritises structurally vulnerable groups rather than uniform adaptation approaches that may overlook differentiated needs. Climate change intersects with inclusive development but does not define it; it acts as a stress multiplier that exposes and intensifies pre-existing inequalities (Ali, et al. 2025). Communities already excluded from infrastructure networks, financial systems, and political representation often face heightened exposure to climate hazards (Putsoane et al., 2024). For this reason, adaptation and disaster risk reduction strategies must therefore be embedded within broader equity frameworks to ensure that resilience investments do not disproportionately benefit already advantaged

populations (Majlingova and Kadar, 2025). Inclusive development also emphasises participatory governance, where decision-making processes must move beyond consultation towards meaningful inclusion (Ahmad and Islam, 2024). Such inclusion enables marginalised groups to influence policy design, implementation strategies, and budgeting priorities. Participatory planning strengthens accountability and ensures that development interventions reflect lived realities (Sebunya and Gichuki, 2024). This is particularly important in marginalised communities, where top-down planning approaches frequently overlook local knowledge and socio-cultural dynamics

3.2 Rural vulnerability in the context of leaving no one behind

In recent years, many parts of South Africa have been devastated by floods, severely affecting the most vulnerable communities (Govender et al., 2025). Despite measures to reduce flood risk and the implementation of adaptation measures, there is always a measure of harm to livelihoods, health and wellbeing, and the economy that persists far beyond flood events (Govender et al., 2025). Both rural and urban areas in south Africa face several challenges related to climate change and these challenges highlight a vulnerability (Zhou et al., 2022) understanding the vulnerability in this context can be approached from two perspectives: the starting point approach which considers that vulnerability is generated by multiple factors and processes, and the end-point approach which considers vulnerability as the residual of climate change impacts (O'Brien, 2004; Zhou et al., 2022). Rural vulnerability is a central concern within the framework of Leaving No One Behind (LNOB), particularly as climate change increasingly interacts with long-standing patterns of exclusion. Communities in rural areas often experience multidimensional deprivation shaped by spatial marginalisation, insecure land tenure, limited access to basic services, weak infrastructure, and constrained economic opportunities (Nyamwanza et al., 2025). Limited access to financial services, insurance mechanisms, early warning systems, and institutional support further constrains the ability of rural households to anticipate, absorb, and recover from climate-related shocks (Appavoo, 2024). Within the LNOB framework, these differentiated impacts underscore the need to recognise climate vulnerability as socially produced and unevenly distributed.

Planning for inclusive resilience in marginalised rural communities, therefore, requires integrating climate considerations into broader inclusive development strategies (Lunga, 2025). Land use planning plays a critical role in linking climate change adaptation with LNOB principles. In many rural areas, settlements are in environmentally sensitive or hazard-prone zones due to customary land allocation practices, historical displacement, or limited availability of safe land. Risk-sensitive and inclusive land use planning can reduce exposure by guiding settlement patterns, protecting ecosystems, and aligning development decisions with climate projections (Hada and Shaw, 2025). Crucially, integrating customary systems with formal planning frameworks, while ensuring meaningful community participation, is essential for operationalising inclusive resilience (Parsons et al., 2025). Participatory governance is a key mechanism through which LNOB can be translated into climate-resilient planning outcomes. Marginalised rural communities are frequently excluded from decision-making processes related to climate adaptation, disaster risk management, and development planning (Mendis et al., 2023).

4 METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research approach to analyse the lived experiences and viewpoints of the residents in the Thulamela Local Municipality with particular focus on rural vulnerability, land-use governance, and climate-related risks such as flooding. The qualitative research approach aligns with the principle of LNOB and inclusive development, as it enables the investigation of social, cultural, and institutional factors that shape the vulnerability in marginalised communities. The interviews were conducted with key informants, including tribal authorities, municipal officials, town planners, and policymakers. The semi-structured interview for key informants was anticipated to last for 15-20 minutes. An in-depth qualitative perspective on the customary land allocation process and tools, as well as flood risks in Thulamela Local Municipality, was obtained through interviews, which were crucial to this study. Key informants, including tribal authorities, municipal town planners, and community representatives, participated in semi-structured interviews to discuss governance frameworks, tools, processes, and challenges in implementing formal land-use planning and decision-making processes. Depending on the participants' choices and availability, the interviews were conducted in various ways, including both in person and online. To protect the participants' identities and ensure respectful engagement with the

customary land governance system, ethical principles, including informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly adhered to. Interview data, which were qualitative and collected from key informants such as tribal authorities, municipal officials, and the community, were examined using thematic data analysis (Atlas.ti). This involved transcribing the key informants' responses, identifying recurring ideas, coalescing this information into meaningful categories, and interpreting the themes, especially those related to customary land governance processes and tools, as well as the environmental considerations of the traditional authorities.

5 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Land allocation and governance challenges

The perceptions of Thulamela Local Municipality residents who participated highlight a community that feels caught between the demands of tribal authorities and the expectations of modern land governance. The residents emphasise that land allocation in rural areas under the tribal authorities is characterised more by favouritism and inconsistency, with some residents being allocated larger or safer stands that are not in areas that are vulnerable to flooding. In contrast, others are placed in areas that are not feasible for residents to reside in, such as locations close to rivers. This imbalance has created a sense of inequality and dissatisfaction with how land is currently allocated in the village, where most residents think their voices are excluded from decisions that directly impact them. The absence of title deeds, PTO, or formal documentation further fuels the insecurity, and the landowner worries about their ability to protect or develop the land they have purchased in the future. Another recurring perception among residents is the concern and fear about the lack of spatial planning implemented by the tribal authorities. Houses built near the river face constant threats and risks from flooding influenced by climate change, and residents believe these risks are exacerbated by poor planning before land is allocated. An example is shown in Figure 1, a boundary fence that has been moved by floods.



Fig. 1: Fence that has moved due to heavy floods. Source: Author, 2025

5.2 Flood vulnerability

Participants have frequently expressed frustration at being placed in areas that are not feasible for residents to live in, simply because locations that are feasible for residents to live in have already been unfairly allocated in the past. These challenges are not just material losses; residents feel neglected and believe their safety is not prioritised by those who oversee land-use planning. These experiences shape the perception that the system in rural areas is unfair and does not prioritize residents' safety. As the area is prone to floods (see Figure 2). Lastly, the residents perceive that the tribal authorities work with no transparency and insufficient accountability. The residents have emphasised that the process of land allocation is informal, is more centred on verbal agreements with no formal documentation, and involves a small-scale site inspection without

involving the technical experts who can assess whether the place is suitable for people to reside in. Most suggestions are that the system must be reformed to ensure fairness, transparency, and inclusivity, especially by involving residents in decision-making and ensuring formal land tenure. Overall, the Thulamela Local Municipality's perception paints a picture of a community seeking community involvement, equity among the residents, and safety and legitimacy in the land allocation process.



Fig. 2: Floods in Thulamela Local Municipality villages. Source: Author, 2025

5.3 Policy and institutional gaps

Key informants emphasised the gaps in policy understanding and enforcement among tribal authorities, highlighting the necessity for capacity building, land policies, tools, and frameworks that accommodate rural areas, as well as greater involvement and engagement from key informants. The suggestions brought up by key informants cater to the demarcation of sites process, utilising GIS tools that will show areas under tribal authorities to resolve conflicts, educate tribal authorities about formal land allocation, and enhance transparency and residents' involvement in decision-making. For spatial planning, these findings highlight the need for multi-level land governance tools and frameworks that can put together the tribal authority and municipal structures, improve the risk-sensitive and sustainable land use in rural areas, and encourage inclusive decision-making to ensure that it is equitable, safe, and efficient land use management in both rural and urban areas. Favouritism, unequal land allocation, a lack of official documents, and poor enforcement of municipal frameworks are challenges that highlight larger land governance issues in rural areas' property management. Land allocation may exacerbate social injustices, marginalise rural area communities, and make it more challenging for residents to access government assistance or development plans. Stand allocation alone is inadequate for a thriving land-use management; institutional changes, promoting collaboration between key informants, and transparent PTO or title deed issuance procedures are also necessary. Customary land governance may become more effective, sustainable, and responsive to the requests of all stakeholders by integrating Indigenous knowledge and involvement with municipal statutory planning tools and frameworks such as SPLUMA. This will improve inclusive growth and lower long-term risk exposure.

6 IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In rural South Africa, traditional land-use planning frequently increases vulnerability by ignoring the needs and viewpoints of marginalised people. Settlements are situated in environmentally dangerous places, making them more vulnerable to floods and other climate-related hazards, because of historical spatial inequality and top-down planning techniques. This emphasises how important it is to have inclusive and risk-sensitive land use planning, where decisions about infrastructure development, ecosystem preservation, and settlement distribution are informed by both community knowledge and scientific evidence. While participatory planning guarantees that local priorities and sociocultural dynamics affect land use decisions, the findings suggest that combining traditional land governance systems with official city planning might increase equity and decrease hazard exposure. Land use planning that embraces the Leaving No One Behind (LNOB) principle also highlights the need to deliberately target the most disadvantaged people in order to ensure that spatial growth builds resilience rather than exacerbates already-existing disparities. In the end,

land use planning needs to change from being a strictly technical endeavour to a socially conscious, inclusive, and flexible procedure that reduces vulnerability and boosts community resilience.

Promoting inclusive flood resilience in marginalised rural communities requires policymakers and planners to use a participatory, community-centered planning approach. Throughout all phases of planning, execution, and oversight, municipalities must establish systems that guarantee the meaningful participation of marginalised groups, such as women, youth, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities. To align customary land allocation methods with risk-sensitive land-use planning, traditional authorities and municipal planning institutions must work together more closely. Additionally, localised vulnerability assessments that combine community knowledge and scientific climate data to create context-specific adaptation methods should be incorporated into resilience planning. To improve community-level adaptive capability, capacity-building programs such as training on early warning systems, disaster preparedness, and climate adaptation should be given top priority. Lastly, to guarantee that interventions actually help the most vulnerable groups, resilience frameworks must incorporate monitoring and evaluation methods that specifically track equitable effects. Through the integration of LNOB principles into planning instruments, governance frameworks, and implementation procedures, municipalities can progress toward climate adaptation paths that are more socially just, sustainable, and equitable.

7 CONCLUSION

This study highlights that inclusive resilience planning is not a one size fits all approach because rural communities in South Africa experience distinct vulnerabilities shaped by historical, social, and environmental factors. The voices, experiences, and expertise of disadvantaged resilient must be incorporated into effective resilience policies, which must transcend top-down governance. Policymakers and practitioners can improve fair participation, lessen vulnerability, and increase adaptive capacity to climate-related threats like flooding by incorporating the LNOB principle into frameworks tailored to the situation. Ultimately, inclusive resilience planning offers a pathway to more equitable, sustainable, and socially just climate adaptation in rural South Africa. The study emphasises how crucial it is to integrate participatory mechanisms that involve women, youth, the elderly, and people with disabilities, as well as to ensure that scientific data on hazards is supplemented by local knowledge and to harmonise customary land governance with formal municipal planning processes. By fostering community trust, equity, and decision-making agency, such strategies can improve social resilience in addition to physical resistance to floods.

The paper also emphasises the need for resilience planning to take into account social, institutional, and governance aspects of vulnerability in addition to environmental and infrastructure issues. Effective operationalisation of inclusive methods can be achieved through risk-sensitive land use planning, capacity training for tribal authorities and municipal officials, and tools such as GIS-based site demarcation and formalised land documentation. By incorporating LNOB principles, interventions are guaranteed to be sustainable, egalitarian, and locally relevant, lowering long-term vulnerability and promoting social justice. In the end, inclusive resilience planning provides rural communities with a way to adapt to climate change in ways that are community-driven, socially conscious, and environmentally aware, resulting in more equitable, secure, and sustainable futures.

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