

Integrating Traditional Authority Participation into Land Use Planning: Implications for Sustainable Rural Housing Delivery

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DOI: 10.48494/REALCORP2026.0196

1 ABSTRACT

Efforts to advance sustainable rural development in South Africa depend significantly on municipalities' ability to coordinate land use planning within contexts where customary land governance remains dominant. Traditional authorities continue to influence land allocation, settlement formation, and community decision-making; however, their participation within statutory planning frameworks remains inconsistently institutionalised and procedurally ambiguous. This study examines how traditional authority participation can be more effectively integrated into municipal land use planning to enhance sustainable rural housing delivery. A systematic review guided by PRISMA 2020 was conducted across Scopus and Web of Science and complemented by policy document analysis of Integrated Development Plans, Spatial Development Frameworks, Land Use Management Schemes, and relevant legislation. Findings reveal persistent governance misalignments characterised by parallel land allocation systems, institutional ambiguity, limited technical capacity, and weakly structured participatory mechanisms. The paper proposes an operational integration framework grounded in institutionalised participation platforms, co-produced land use guidelines, reciprocal capacity-building, and integrated monitoring mechanisms. The study contributes actionable guidance for municipalities seeking to reconcile dual land administration systems and strengthen inclusive rural housing delivery.

Keywords: Customary land governance, land use planning, participatory governance, sustainable rural housing, rural development

2 INTRODUCTION

Securing sustainable rural development remains a persistent challenge in South Africa, particularly in regions where rapid demographic shifts, uneven service provision, and entrenched spatial inequalities continue to shape settlement outcomes. While municipalities are constitutionally mandated to lead spatial planning and housing delivery, much of rural South Africa remains governed by customary land tenure systems, in which traditional authorities play a central role in land allocation, settlement formation, and community governance. This dual system of land administration presents both opportunities and tensions for land use planning, especially in efforts to deliver sustainable and inclusive rural housing.

Land use planning frameworks, formalised through instruments such as Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), Spatial Development Frameworks (SDFs), and Land Use Management Systems (LUMS), are intended to guide coordinated development and equitable access to land, services, and housing. However, existing scholarship highlights a persistent misalignment between statutory planning systems and customary land governance practices, resulting in fragmented decision-making, contested authority, and implementation gaps in rural development (Ntsebeza, 2005; Oomen, 2005; Claassens, 2015). Traditional authorities often function as intermediaries between rural communities and the state, yet their participation in formal planning processes remains inconsistently defined, weakly institutionalised, and largely consultative rather than collaborative.

Recent debates within planning and governance literature call for more inclusive, participatory, and context-sensitive planning approaches, particularly in underserved rural areas where formal institutions alone struggle to respond to local needs (Sihlongonyane, 2015; Todes & Turok, 2018). At the same time, rural housing delivery continues to be constrained by insecure tenure, unclear land rights, and limited coordination

between municipal planners and customary institutions, undermining long-term sustainability and local resilience (Ainslie & Kepe, 2016; Koelble & Lipuma, 2011).

Despite growing recognition of the importance of traditional authorities in rural governance, there remains a critical gap in empirical and conceptual work that systematically examines how their participation can be meaningfully integrated into land use planning frameworks, rather than treated as an external or parallel process. Much of the existing literature focuses either on customary land tenure or on statutory planning systems in isolation, offering limited guidance on practical participation pathways that could bridge these governance regimes in support of sustainable rural housing outcomes.

This paper examines the integration of traditional authority participation into land use planning to enhance sustainable rural housing delivery in South Africa. It aims to assess existing approaches to incorporating traditional authority involvement within municipal land use planning instruments, such as Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), Spatial Development Frameworks (SDFs), and Land Use Management Schemes (LUMS). Additionally, it seeks to identify key governance and institutional barriers that lead to misalignment between customary land governance and statutory planning frameworks. The study proposes an integrated participatory intervention designed to strengthen collaboration between traditional authorities and municipalities in the delivery of sustainable rural housing. By conducting a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature, analyzing municipal planning instruments, and examining comparative case studies from South Africa, the research aspires to contribute to ongoing discussions about rural planning reform, participatory governance, and spatial justice. Addressing contemporary calls for innovative, inclusive, and resilient rural development strategies that harmonize state-led planning with locally grounded governance systems.

This paper, therefore, positions traditional authority participation not as an external consultative requirement, but as a core governance dimension of sustainable rural housing delivery within South Africa's statutory planning framework.

3 CONCEPTUAL AND POLICY GROUNDING OF CUSTOMARY GOVERNANCE AND PARTICIPATION IN RURAL HOUSING

Customary land governance continues to shape land access, settlement formation, and housing development across large parts of rural South Africa. Under customary tenure systems, traditional authorities play a central role in land allocation, dispute resolution, and community decision-making, operating through socially embedded norms and practices that differ from statutory land administration (Ntsebeza, 2005; Oomen, 2005). While these systems retain local legitimacy, they coexist uneasily with municipal land use planning frameworks, creating parallel governance systems that complicate rural housing delivery and tenure security.

Post-apartheid reforms have struggled to reconcile customary authority with democratic and developmental local government. Although the Constitution recognises traditional leadership and the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA) promotes inclusive and participatory planning, the role of traditional authorities in spatial planning remains ambiguously defined (Claassens, 2015; Koelble & Lipuma, 2011). Consequently, land allocation in customary areas frequently occurs outside Spatial Development Frameworks (SDFs) and Land Use Management Systems (LUMS), undermining spatial coordination and long-term sustainability.

From a planning theory perspective, communicative and collaborative planning frameworks emphasise inclusive decision-making, recognition of local knowledge, and negotiated governance between state and non-state actors (Healey, 1997). In practice, however, participatory planning in rural South Africa remains uneven. Empirical studies demonstrate that traditional authorities are often positioned as consultees rather than institutional partners in municipal planning processes, limiting their influence over spatial and housing outcomes (Sihlongonyane, 2015; Todes & Turok, 2018).

The coexistence of statutory and customary systems produces persistent governance barriers, including overlapping mandates, unclear authority, and institutional power imbalances (Claassens, 2015; Ainslie & Kepe, 2016). These misalignments contribute to delayed housing delivery, insecure tenure, and spatially fragmented settlements. Treating customary governance as external to formal planning systems reinforces institutional fragmentation rather than enabling integrated rural development.

Despite these challenges, emerging scholarship identifies integrative approaches such as negotiated planning agreements, joint planning forums, and co-governance mechanisms that formally recognise traditional authorities within planning processes (Ainslie & Kepe, 2016; Sihlongonyane, 2015). However, such approaches remain case-specific and under-theorised, highlighting the need for systematic synthesis and practical guidance aligned with SPLUMA mandates.

4 METHODOLOGY: SYSTEMATIC REVIEW AND POLICY DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

This study employed a systematic literature review approach to examine how traditional authority participation can be integrated into land use planning to improve sustainable rural housing delivery in South Africa. The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines (Page et al., 2021), ensuring transparency and reproducibility in study selection and data extraction.

A search was conducted across multiple academic and policy databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. Additional sources included municipal planning documents, Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), Spatial Development Frameworks (SDFs), Land Use Management Schemes (LUMS), and relevant legislation (e.g., SPLUMA, 2013). Search terms included combinations of “customary land governance”, “traditional authorities”, “land use planning, participation”, “SPLUMA”, and “rural housing”. Peer-reviewed journal articles, policy-oriented studies, and relevant grey literature published between 2005 and 2025 were considered to capture post-apartheid governance dynamics. Full-text screening assessed inclusion criteria: (1) relevance to municipal planning or customary governance; (2) focus on rural housing delivery or settlement planning; (3) empirical evidence or policy frameworks. After full-text review, 62 studies and 18 municipal or government documents were included in the final analysis. Thematic synthesis was used to identify recurring governance challenges, participation models, and integrative practices. Comparative South African case studies were analysed to contextualise institutional dynamics and identify transferable lessons for municipal planning practice.

5 REVIEW FINDINGS: GOVERNANCE GAPS AND EMERGING THEMES

5.1 Misalignment Between Customary Governance and Statutory Planning

The review reveals consistent misalignment between customary land allocation practices and municipal planning instruments.

Traditional authorities often allocate land independently of SDFs and land use schemes, resulting in spatial fragmentation, irregular planning of infrastructure, and service inefficiencies (Ntsebeza, 2005; Koelble & Lipuma, 2011). On the other hand, participation becomes a mere procedural formality rather than a genuine collaborative effort: While SPLUMA promotes active participation, interactions with traditional authorities, this often tends to be more of a ticking the box exercise than a substantive one. Meetings typically lack the willingness and preparedness to engage in meaningful dialogue; for instance, government authorities arrive with a formal agenda, focusing on centralising legislation, municipal laws, and regulations rather than fostering open, genuine engagement. As a result, the scope of participation often remains limited to initial consultation phases. In these instances, discussions lead to a consultative phase where no consensus is achieved, conflicts arise, and stakeholders are ultimately left feeling marginalised, with minimal influence over final planning decisions. Highlighting a significant disconnect between the mandate for participation and the reality of its implementation (Sihlongonyane, 2015; Todes and Turok, 2018). In terms of capacity and institutional gaps, it is evident that limited planning abilities within municipalities pose a significant barrier. This is further compounded by insufficient technical support provided to traditional authorities, resulting in ineffective collaboration between the two entities. The disconnect between these systems often leads to a lack of mutual understanding regarding governance processes, which only exacerbates feelings of mistrust and perpetuates institutional silos. Such dynamics can stifle progress and hinder effective governance, according to Claassens (2015).

Figure 1 below presents a synthesis of key governance challenges affecting the integration of traditional authorities into municipal land use planning and links these challenges to proposed integrative planning responses. Drawing on SPLUMA principles and analysis of IDPs, SDFs, and LUMS, the table highlights persistent issues such as institutional ambiguity, fragmented decision-making, capacity limitations, and weak

participatory mechanisms. It further outlines targeted interventions, including institutionalised participation platforms, co-produced land use guidelines, capacity-building initiatives, and integrated monitoring and conflict resolution mechanisms aimed at strengthening cooperative governance and supporting sustainable rural housing delivery within customary land tenure contexts.


Planning Implications		
Theme	Planning Implication	
 Parallel governance	Separate land allocation systems	1. Fragmented settlements 2. Weak participation
 Consultative engagement only	Low local legitimacy	1. Fragmented settlements 2. Weak participation
 Capacity gaps	Limited planning literacy	Delayed housing delivery

Figure 1: Planning Implications

6 PROPOSED PLANNING INTERVENTIONS FOR INTEGRATING TRADITIONAL AUTHORITIES

Drawing on the systematic review and analysis of policy and planning literature, this study proposes four interrelated interventions to strengthen the integration of traditional authority participation into land use planning for sustainable rural housing delivery.

6.1 Institutionalised Participation Platforms within Municipal Planning

Municipalities should formalise the participation of traditional authorities through structured, legally recognised platforms embedded within existing planning instruments such as Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and Spatial Development Frameworks (SDFs). Rather than ad hoc consultation, traditional authorities should be positioned as institutional partners in planning forums, particularly during the formulation, review, and implementation phases of spatial and housing plans. This approach aligns with SPLUMA's emphasis on cooperative governance and inclusive decision-making, while enhancing the legitimacy and local relevance of rural housing interventions. Lessons can be learnt from Joint Planning Forums in KwaZulu-Natal (Sihlongonyane, 2015): Municipalities established structured forums where chiefs and councillors jointly reviewed SDF proposals. This reduced conflict between statutory planning and customary land allocation, demonstrating practical institutionalisation. For the Umlalazi Municipality (Mngomezulu, 2020), Municipal leadership created ward-level committees, including traditional leaders, leading to more transparent land allocation and improved housing project implementation.

6.2 Co-produced Land Use Guidelines for Customary Areas

To address misalignment between land allocation practices and statutory planning frameworks, municipalities and traditional authorities should jointly develop context-sensitive land use guidelines tailored to customary tenure systems. These guidelines can translate SDF principles into locally applicable spatial rules that respect customary practices while promoting sustainable settlement patterns, infrastructure coordination, and environmental protection. Co-produced guidelines offer a practical mechanism for bridging formal planning requirements with lived governance practices in rural areas. Co-designed settlement layouts allowed traditional leaders to allocate land while maintaining alignment with municipal zoning and infrastructure plans. For example, the Gauteng Rural SDF Pilot (Gauteng Department of Human Settlements, 2021): Drafted land use guides for peri-urban villages, blending customary allocation protocols with municipal building standards.

6.3 Capacity Building and Technical Support for Hybrid Governance

Effective participation requires both institutional recognition and technical capacity. Municipalities, supported by provincial governments, should invest in targeted capacity-building programmes for traditional authorities on land use planning, housing policy, and development control processes. Simultaneously, planners and municipal officials require training on customary tenure systems and culturally embedded

governance practices. Strengthening mutual capacity can reduce institutional mistrust and improve coordination across dual land administration systems.

Workshops can be organised to train chiefs and municipal officials on planning processes, clarifying their roles and procedures. This can lead to improved tenure security and expedited housing project approvals. Capacity-building initiatives can empower communities by enhancing their understanding of Integrated Development Plan (IDP) processes, thereby increasing their participation in rural housing planning. According to Matlala and Uwizeyimana (2020), technical support has enabled under-resourced municipalities to effectively implement improved outcomes in participatory governance.

6.4 Integrated Monitoring and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

The integration of traditional authorities into planning processes should be supported by transparent monitoring and conflict resolution mechanisms. Joint monitoring committees can track housing delivery outcomes, land allocation decisions, and compliance with agreed planning frameworks. Clear procedures for resolving disputes between municipalities, traditional authorities, and communities can prevent delays and enhance tenure security. Such mechanisms promote accountability while recognising the plural governance realities of rural South Africa.

This can be accomplished through community monitoring committees that facilitate the resolution of disputes related to land allocation and housing construction, thereby fostering trust and enhancing project sustainability. Formal mediation between municipalities and traditional authorities potentially reduces overlapping land claims and mitigates service delivery protests.

7 CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates that sustainable rural housing delivery in South Africa is fundamentally shaped by how effectively municipalities integrate customary governance systems into statutory planning processes. Persistent misalignments between traditional authorities and municipal planning frameworks continue to undermine tenure security, spatial coherence, and development outcomes. While traditional authorities remain central to land allocation and community governance, their participation in planning processes is often weakly institutionalised.

By synthesising scholarly literature, policy frameworks, and municipal planning instruments, this study advances a structured approach for integrating traditional authority participation through institutionalised platforms, co-produced planning guidelines, capacity-building, and integrated monitoring mechanisms. Grounded in SPLUMA and participatory planning principles, the proposed framework offers practical guidance for municipalities navigating dual land administration systems. In doing so, the paper contributes to debates on rural planning reform, spatial justice, and inclusive development, while providing actionable insights for strengthening sustainable rural housing delivery in customary land contexts.

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