

A Systematic Review of Policy and Legislative Gaps in Advancing Sustainable Human Settlements in Small Rural Towns: A Case of South Africa

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1 ABSTRACT

Despite South Africa's progressive policy and legislative frameworks aimed at transforming human settlements, the unique spatial, social, and economic dynamics of rural towns remain largely marginalised within mainstream planning discourses. As rural development gains prominence in national planning priorities, the question of whether existing policies and laws effectively support sustainable rural human settlements becomes critical. This paper contends that a disconnect exists between the legislative vision and the practical realities of rural settlement development. The study aims to systematically examine South Africa's policy and legislative environment to identify gaps, inconsistencies, and biases that hinder sustainable rural development. The study employs the PRISMA method, focusing on frameworks such as Breaking New Ground (BNG), the Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF), the Rural Development Framework, SPLUMA, and other sectoral policies and legislation. Findings indicate that most frameworks adopt an urban-centric approach, offering limited guidance for rural spatial forms, tenure arrangements, or informal settlement upgrading in small towns. Integrated planning is often cited but seldom achieved due to institutional fragmentation and inadequate coordination across governance levels. Moreover, rural development strategies lack enforceable rural-specific standards and actionable instruments. The paper proposes a multi-level governance framework anchored in spatial justice, legislative alignment, and capacity building at local levels. It calls for the localisation of planning tools, legal recognition of rural informality, and enhanced intergovernmental synergy to ensure that rural towns are not left behind in South Africa's human settlements agenda.

Keywords: South Africa, governance, human settlements, policy implementation, rural towns

2 INTRODUCTION

South Africa's post-apartheid policy and legislative architecture have evolved with a stated commitment to address spatial inequality and to enhance sustainable human settlements. Since 2004, the Breaking New Ground (BNG) policy has served as the government's comprehensive strategy for sustainable human settlement development, integrating subsidised, rental, and bonded housing with municipal engineering and mixed-use development principles. However, critiques argue that its implementation has been uneven, particularly in rural settings where small rural towns face entrenched socio-spatial disadvantages that typical urban-biased policies struggle to address effectively (South African Government, n.d.). Spatially, the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA) 16 of 2013 provides a unified legislative framework for spatial planning and land use management across South Africa, aiming to redress past imbalances and promote social and economic inclusion through development principles such as spatial justice and sustainability. SPLUMA mandates wall-to-wall land use schemes and Spatial Development Frameworks (SDFs) at the municipal level, requiring integrated spatial planning that equally considers rural and urban localities (Republic of South Africa, 2013). At the same time, sectoral frameworks such as the Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF) stress spatial transformation and integration but are frequently interpreted through an urban lens, with limited tailored guidance for rural towns despite acknowledging rural-urban interdependencies (Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs [CoGTA], 2022). Despite these progressive frameworks, significant limitations persist in how rural settlement realities are incorporated into legislative and policy instruments. The limited guidance on rural spatial forms, tenure systems under customary authority, and informal settlement upgrading in small towns reflects broader institutional challenges. Weak intergovernmental coordination, capacity constraints at local levels, and the dominance of urban-centred planning paradigms often undermine meaningful rural integration within national settlement agendas (IUDF, 2020). This review, therefore, situates South Africa's human settlements

legislative frameworks within their historical and institutional aspects, intending to identify limitations that impede the advancement of sustainable human settlements in small rural towns.

3 SYSTEMATIC POLICY AND LEGISLATIVE ANALYSIS

The literature on sustainable rural human settlements in South Africa reveals persistent deficiencies in implementation that destabilize efforts to achieve equitable rural development. A significant theme in this body of work is that historical legacies of segregation, land dispossession, and dualistic spatial planning continue to shape rural settlement dynamics, resulting in structural barriers that current policies struggle to overcome. Early analyses of rural development in South Africa highlighted how apartheid land-use regimes produced marginalised rural economies and settlement patterns, reinforcing poverty and limited access to basic services and opportunities across rural localities. These structural factors have been seen not merely as residual “backlogs” but as deeply embedded socio-economic attributes of rural spaces that require setting-sensitive policy frameworks (Makgetla 2010). A growing body of scholarship stresses that government planning instruments tend to replicate urban-centric paradigms that are ill-suited to the complexities of rural areas. For example, traditional urban planning tools embedded in Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and spatial frameworks often assume service delivery configurations appropriate to urban densities, leading to strained institutional and fiscal capacities when applied to dispersed rural populations. Linked to this is the argument that rural spatial forms are often ignored in dominant planning discourses, which prioritise densification and economic agglomeration as if rural settlements were scaled-down versions of urban centres (South African Local Government Association [SALGA], 2019).

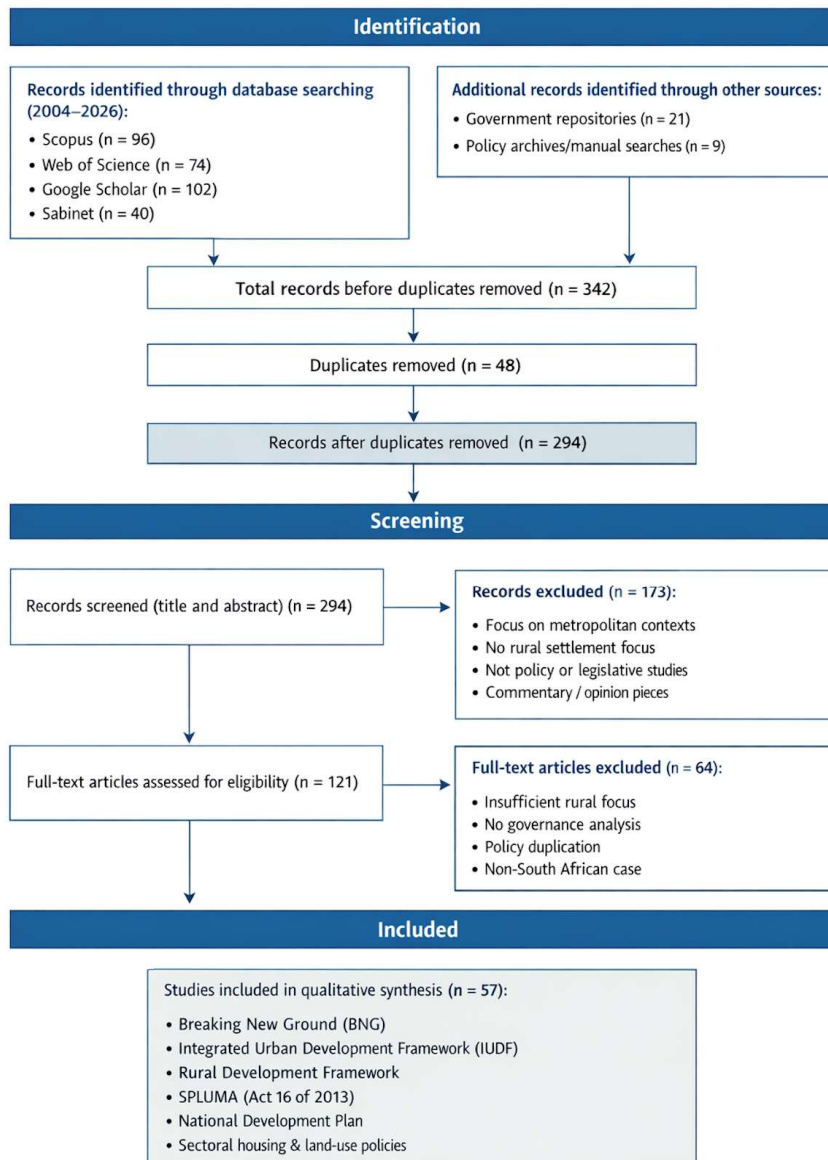


Figure 1: Review Approach

Several scholars also note the limitations of statutory planning instruments in navigating systemic constraints such as insecure land tenure and customary land governance. While SPLUMA provides a unified spatial planning framework, its normative principles and reliance on formal land-use schemes have been critiqued for insufficiently accounting for rural land tenure heterogeneity, including communal land under traditional authorities. This tension has significant implications for sustainable settlement outcomes in rural towns where customary land rights remain central to social and economic life. In addition, recent research foregrounds the role of governance pluralism in shaping rural development trajectories. Studies advocating for frameworks such as the Rural Development and Governance Initiative (RDGI) argue that effective rural development requires mechanisms that bridge formal local government structures and traditional leadership systems, recognising that traditional authorities continue to wield considerable socio-political influence in rural areas. Such work also highlights capacity constraints and role ambiguities that currently limit the participation of traditional authorities in formal planning and governance processes (Sebola-Samanyanga, 2025). The literature highlights the need to reconceptualise rural development research and practice. Recent reviews argue for interdisciplinary frameworks that engage with rural heterogeneity, spatial justice, and governance dynamics rather than perpetuating simplistic urban–rural dichotomies. Such frameworks aim to better capture setting-specific definitions of ‘rural’ and integrate place-based development approaches that align policy instruments with lived realities in small rural towns. Overall, these strands of literature collectively point to an enduring policy–practice deficit in South Africa’s rural settlement landscape, indicating the need for more adaptive frameworks to advance sustainable human settlements in rural areas.

4 METHODOLOGY IMPERATIVES

This study employed a systematic qualitative review approach to investigate policy and legislative limitations influencing the development of sustainable human settlements in small rural towns in South Africa. The review was informed by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, ensuring transparency, methodological rigour, and replicability in the identification, selection, and analysis of sources. A comprehensive and structured search strategy was implemented across academic databases, government repositories, and policy archives to capture relevant national legislation, policy instruments, and peer-reviewed literature relating to human settlements, spatial planning, and rural development, as shown in Figure 1. The inclusion criteria focused on sources that explicitly engaged with human settlements, spatial planning, land governance, or rural development within the South African setting, while exclusion criteria filtered out materials that did not address rural or small-town settlement dynamics. The selected documents were analysed using thematic content analysis, with attention given to policy objectives, underlying spatial assumptions, implementation mechanisms, and governance arrangements. Essential national frameworks, including Breaking New Ground, the Integrated Urban Development Framework, the Rural Development Framework, and the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA), were examined comparatively to evaluate their coherence, alignment, and applicability to rural settings. This methodological approach was well-suited to interrogating a complex and fragmented policy landscape and enabled the synthesis of insights that underpin a practical, policy-oriented framework for advancing sustainable human settlement development in small rural towns.

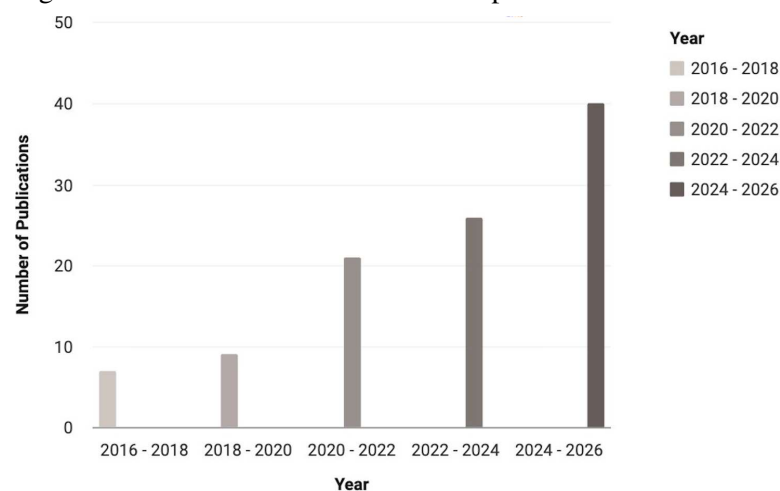


Figure 2: Publication Trend

5 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the bibliometric analysis, highlighting publication trends, dominant themes, and patterns of collaboration related to sustainable human settlements. The analysis provides insight into the conceptual focus and knowledge limitations within the literature, particularly in relation to rural and small-town settings.

Figure 2 demonstrates a marked and accelerating increase in scholarly output on sustainable human settlements from 2016–2026, with particularly strong growth after 2020. This rise coincides with renewed global and national attention to sustainability, spatial justice, and post-COVID development challenges, especially in the Global South (UN-Habitat, 2020). However, while the quantity of publications has increased, the findings of this review suggest that rural towns remain conceptually peripheral within much of this literature. Many studies framed under “sustainable development” or “human settlements” continue to privilege metropolitan, peri-urban, or informal urban settlements, often treating rural towns as transitional or residual spaces rather than as distinct settlement systems. This pattern mirrors South Africa’s policy trajectory. Despite progressive post-apartheid reforms, such as Breaking New Ground (BNG) and the Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF), policy attention remains largely urban-centric, with rural towns frequently subsumed under broader rural development narratives or secondary cities, rather than addressed through tailored settlement frameworks.

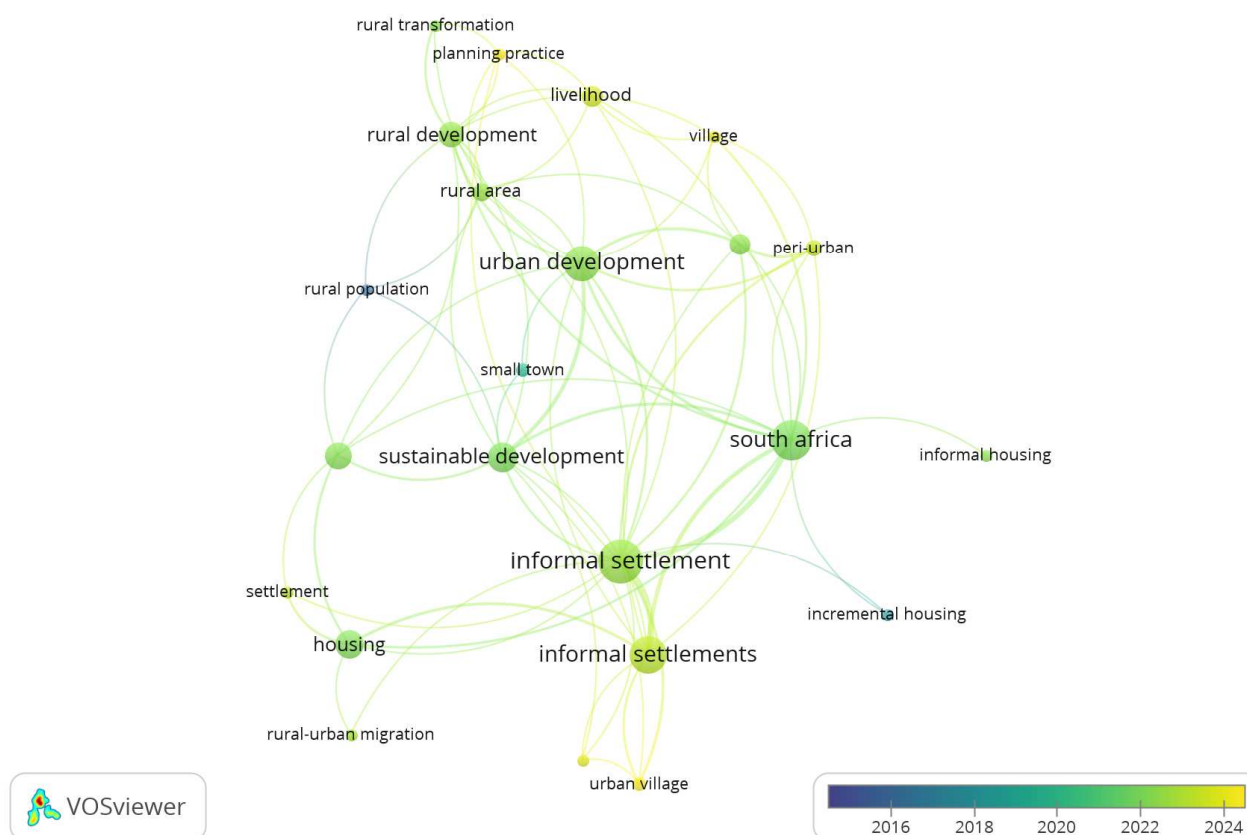


Figure 3: Keywords

Figure 3 provides a keyword co-occurrence network, offering important insights into the dominant thematic orientations shaping scholarly debates. The highly central keywords such as urban development, informal settlement(s), housing, and sustainable development suggest that the literature is primarily anchored in urban theory and practice, even when rural areas are nominally included. Informal settlements emerge as a critical concern, yet they are most often discussed within metropolitan upgrading paradigms, drawing on urban policy tools that are ill-suited to rural spatial forms. This aligns with the study’s finding that informality in rural towns is poorly recognised in law and policy. Evidence from South African perspectives further

indicates that effective settlement upgrading depends on legislative flexibility, strong community participation, and secure tenure arrangements, rather than solely on formal housing delivery models (Mndzebele & Gumbo, 2023). Instruments such as SPLUMA (Republic of South Africa, 2013) provide procedural guidance for land-use management but fail to adequately address customary tenure, hybrid land-administration systems, or dispersed settlement patterns common in rural towns.

Keywords such as rural development, small town, livelihood, rural population, and rural transformation appear less central and more weakly connected within the network. This reflects a broader tendency in both scholarship and policy to treat rural towns as support spaces for urban economies, rather than as sites of autonomous development with distinct governance, infrastructure, and tenure challenges. Notably, planning practice appears weakly linked, suggesting a persistent deficit between policy rhetoric and implementation capacity. While integrated planning is repeatedly stressed in frameworks such as the National Development Plan (NDP) and IUDF, empirical studies show that rural municipalities often lack the institutional capacity, financial resources, and technical expertise to operationalise these ambitions.

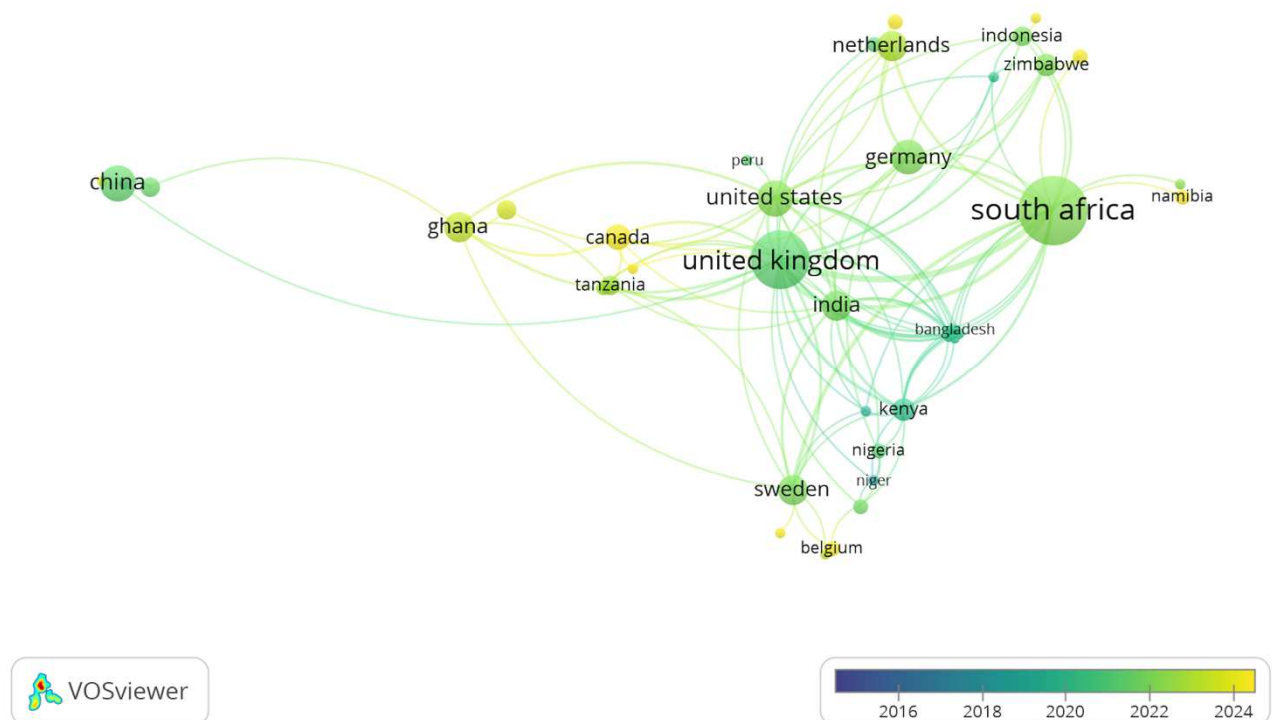


Figure 4: Countries

Figure 4 reveals the country co-authorship network in which South Africa occupies a dominant central position, strongly connected to the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, and Sweden. This reflects South Africa's role as both a policy laboratory and a focal point for Global South urban and settlement research. While international collaboration has enriched the theoretical depth of South African planning scholarship, the findings suggest a continued reliance on Global North planning paradigms, particularly those rooted in urban sustainability, compact city models, and formalised land markets. This has important implications for rural towns. Planning approaches imported from urban or international contexts often fail to accommodate:

- communal and customary land tenure systems;
- seasonal and livelihood-based settlement patterns;
- incremental and self-built housing processes outside formal subsidy regimes.

As a result, rural towns remain legally and institutionally misaligned with the planning tools intended to guide their development.

6 TOWARDS THE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL SETTLEMENT DEVELOPMENT (IFSRSD)

This section converts the study’s analytical findings into practical policy and planning recommendations intended to enhance sustainable human settlement development in small rural towns. The recommendations are presented as an applied framework designed to promote legislative coherence, improve institutional coordination, and enable implementation across different levels of governance.

| Framework Dimension | Strategic Recommendation | Primary Implementation Focus |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Legislative Alignment | Introduce rural-specific provisions within existing human settlement and spatial planning legislation | Amend SPLUMA regulations, housing codes, and sectoral legislation to explicitly address small rural town contexts |
| Spatial Justice | Institutionalise spatial justice principles in rural settlement planning | Embed equity-based spatial criteria in SDFs and land-use schemes for rural towns |
| Planning Instruments | Develop context-sensitive planning tools tailored to rural settlement forms | Localised SDF templates, rural land-use schemes, and flexible zoning mechanisms |
| Informality Recognition | Formally recognise and regulate rural informal settlements | Legal recognition of incremental housing, customary tenure, and non-standard settlement patterns |
| Governance Integration | Strengthen intergovernmental coordination across rural development sectors | Clear role delineation between national, provincial, and local government spheres |
| Municipal Capacity | Enhance planning and implementation capacity in rural municipalities | Targeted technical support, training programmes, and resourced planning units |
| Policy Localisation | Enable adaptation of national policies to local rural realities | Municipal discretion to contextualise national frameworks without regulatory penalties |
| Monitoring & Accountability | Introduce enforceable rural development performance indicators | Rural-specific benchmarks, reporting requirements, and compliance mechanisms |
| Knowledge Production | Promote rural-focused research and planning innovation | Support locally grounded research, pilot projects, and practitioner-led learning |
| Funding Alignment | Align fiscal instruments with rural settlement priorities | Ring-fenced funding streams for rural town settlement upgrading and infrastructure |

Table 1: Institutional Framework for Sustainable Rural Settlement Development (IFSRSD)

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