

# Planning for the Margins: A Stakeholder-Centred Legislative Analysis of Sustainable Human Settlements Policy in South Africa's Small Rural Towns

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## 1 ABSTRACT

South Africa's pursuit of sustainable human settlements is underpinned by a complex web of policies and legislative frameworks designed to redress spatial inequalities and promote inclusive development. Yet, small rural towns remain at the margins of planning and implementation, often constrained by weak institutional capacity, limited investment, and fragmented stakeholder coordination. This paper undertakes a stakeholder-centred legislative analysis to unpack how critical actors engage with, interpret, and implement sustainable human settlements policies within these rural settings. It examines the interplay between national frameworks, such as the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA), the Housing Act, and the National Development Plan (NDP 2030), and local governance realities. Using a qualitative stakeholder analysis method, the study identifies and categorises stakeholders according to their influence and interest, ranging from national and provincial departments, district and local municipalities, traditional authorities, private developers, civil society organisations, and community-based structures. Secondary data from policy documents, planning frameworks, and implementation reports are analysed to determine stakeholder roles, responsibilities, and levels of collaboration in advancing sustainable human settlements in small rural towns. Findings reveal a fragmented institutional landscape characterised by limited coordination between state and non-state actors, inadequate inclusion of traditional leadership in planning processes, and misaligned accountability frameworks. The study argues that the current legislative environment lacks mechanisms for shared governance and participatory decision-making at the local level. Consequently, a rural-responsive stakeholder framework is proposed, one that clarifies roles, strengthens vertical and horizontal collaboration, and promotes legislative harmonisation to enhance collective implementation. This paper contributes to debates on inclusive governance and spatial justice by advancing a stakeholder-oriented approach to sustainable human settlements planning in South Africa's small rural town.

Keywords: rural development, policy coherence, SPLUMA, small towns, South Africa

## 2 INTRODUCTION

South Africa's post-apartheid planning agenda has been strongly shaped by the pursuit of spatial justice, equity, and the transformation of historically fragmented human settlements. Central to this agenda is the concept of sustainable human settlements, which extends beyond housing provision to encompass access to infrastructure, services, livelihoods, social facilities, and inclusive governance within well-located and integrated spaces (Department of Human Settlements [DHS], 2004; Republic of South Africa, 2012). Over the past three decades, the state has introduced an extensive suite of policy and legislative instruments, most notably the Housing Act 107 of 1997, the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act 16 of 2013 (SPLUMA), and the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, aimed at restructuring settlement patterns and redressing entrenched spatial inequalities (RSA, 1997; RSA, 2013; National Planning Commission [NPC], 2012).

Despite these progressive frameworks, the translation of national policy ambitions into meaningful outcomes remains uneven, particularly within small rural towns. While much of the planning and housing literature in South Africa has focused on metropolitan areas, secondary cities, and informal settlements, small rural towns continue to occupy a marginal position in both policy interpretation and implementation. These settlements are often characterised by weak municipal capacity, limited fiscal resources, declining local economies, and complex governance arrangements involving traditional leadership structures. As a result, the implementation of sustainable human settlements policy in rural settings frequently diverges from legislative intent, reinforcing rather than alleviating spatial and socio-economic exclusion. Existing studies have highlighted persistent tensions between legislative frameworks and local implementation capacities, noting

that policies designed at the national level frequently fail to account for the differentiated institutional, spatial, and socio-cultural realities of rural settlements. In small rural towns, these tensions are exacerbated by limited stakeholder participation in decision-making processes, unclear accountability mechanisms, and weak horizontal and vertical collaboration between state and non-state actors (Pieterse et al., 2015). Consequently, sustainable human settlements initiatives are often implemented in a fragmented and project-driven manner, undermining their long-term sustainability and developmental impact. The paper argues that the current legislative environment inadequately enables shared governance and meaningful stakeholder participation in small rural towns. It contends that without clearer role definition, stronger intergovernmental coordination, and more inclusive engagement with traditional and community-based actors, the goal of sustainable human settlements in rural South Africa will remain elusive. Through proposing a rural-responsive stakeholder framework, the study contributes to debates on inclusive governance, policy coherence, and spatial justice, offering insights for strengthening the collective implementation of human settlements policy in marginalised rural settings.

### 3 LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of sustainable human settlements has been widely discussed in South African planning and housing scholarship, with consensus that it extends beyond the physical provision of housing to encompass spatial integration, social inclusion, economic opportunity, environmental sustainability, and effective governance (Department of Human Settlements [DHS], 2004; Turok, 2016). Influenced by international frameworks such as the Habitat Agenda and the New Urban Agenda, South Africa's policy discourse frames human settlements as interconnected socio-spatial systems that require coordinated planning, infrastructure provision, and participatory governance (UNHabitat, 2016). However, scholars consistently observe a disconnect between this holistic conceptualisation and implementation practices, which remain dominated by output-driven housing delivery models, particularly in contexts with limited institutional capacity (Huchzermeyer, 2011). This implementation deficit is especially evident in rural South Africa, where the structural conditions shaping settlement development differ markedly from those in metropolitan areas. Rural towns are often characterised by weak and declining local economies, limited private sector investment, high levels of poverty, and heavy reliance on intergovernmental fiscal transfers (ScienceDirect, 2026). Unlike large cities, where sustainable human settlements debates focus on spatial restructuring and densification, rural towns face challenges related to service viability, low development thresholds, and spatial dispersion. As a result, policies and planning instruments developed within predominantly urban-centric paradigms often struggle to respond effectively to rural realities.

The marginal position of small rural towns within national development and planning frameworks has been well documented. Research shows that these towns are frequently treated as residual or administrative spaces rather than as strategic nodes of spatial and economic development (Asare Okyere et al., 2025). Planning capacity in rural municipalities is commonly constrained by shortages of skilled personnel, high staff turnover, limited technical support, and inadequate access to reliable spatial data. Consequently, statutory planning tools such as Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) and Spatial Development Frameworks (SDFs) often display weak strategic alignment with housing and land-use management functions, limiting their effectiveness in guiding sustainable human settlements development (Odendaal, 2007). Within this background, governance and stakeholder dynamics have emerged as critical determinants of planning and human settlements outcomes. SPLUMA explicitly promotes cooperative governance, spatial justice, and stakeholder participation, positioning collaboration across spheres of government and between state and nonstate actors as a central principle of spatial planning (Republic of South Africa, 2013). Despite this legislative intent, empirical studies reveal persistent institutional fragmentation and poor coordination in practice, particularly in rural municipalities where administrative capacity is weakest. Vertical coordination between national, provincial, and local government spheres remains inconsistent, while horizontal collaboration across sector departments involved in housing, infrastructure, land, and social services is often limited. The role of non-state actors in rural human settlements planning further complicates the governance landscape. Traditional authorities, in particular, play a significant role in land allocation and settlement development in many rural areas, yet their involvement in formal planning processes is frequently ambiguous or marginalised (Faboye, Gumbo & Sebola-Samanyanga, 2024). Studies indicate that the lack of clear legislative guidance on the integration of customary land governance systems into municipal planning

frameworks creates uncertainty, contestation, and delays in development implementation. This disjuncture undermines both planning legitimacy and the sustainability of human settlements initiatives in rural towns.

Community participation, although widely endorsed in policy, has similarly been critiqued for its limited influence on planning outcomes. Research suggests that participation in human settlements planning often takes the form of procedural consultation rather than substantive engagement, with communities rarely empowered to shape decisions regarding settlement location, design, or service provision (Terdo, 2024). In rural settings, where communities may already experience political and spatial marginalisation, such tokenistic participation reinforces existing power asymmetries and weakens accountability mechanisms. A further strand of the literature interrogates the coherence of South Africa's legislative environment governing planning and human settlements. While SPLUMA, the Housing Act, and related policy instruments articulate broadly aligned objectives, scholars argue that their implementation is undermined by overlapping mandates, unclear role delineation, and inconsistent interpretation across government spheres. These challenges are particularly pronounced in small rural towns, where limited legal expertise and administrative capacity constrain municipalities' ability to navigate complex legislative requirements. As a result, planning practice often becomes compliance-driven rather than developmental, with statutory instruments produced to satisfy legislative obligations rather than to guide integrated and setting-responsive settlement development. Importantly, much of the existing literature examines policy frameworks, institutional capacity, or planning instruments in isolation, with limited attention to how legislation is mediated through stakeholder relationships in specific local aspects. Although there is growing recognition that planning outcomes are shaped by the interaction between actors, institutions, and regulatory frameworks, few studies explicitly analyse sustainable human settlements through a stakeholder-centred legislative lens, particularly in small rural towns. This represents a significant limitation, given that implementation success depends not only on policy design but also on how stakeholders interpret, negotiate, and operationalise legislative mandates within constrained and contested governance environments. This study responds to this deficit by foregrounding stakeholders as active agents within the legislative environment of sustainable human settlements planning. Through assessing how roles, interests, influence, and collaboration patterns shape implementation in small rural towns, the research advances a more comprehensive understanding of governance dynamics. It contributes to broader debates on inclusive planning, legislative coherence, and spatial justice in South Africa.

#### 4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, systematic policy and stakeholder review guided by the PRISMA framework to ensure methodological transparency, rigour, and replicability in examining sustainable human settlements governance in South Africa's small rural towns.

Rather than functioning as a statistical synthesis tool, PRISMA is applied as a structured reporting guide that clarifies how relevant legislative and policy documents were identified, screened, and analysed as indicated in Figure 1. The review focuses exclusively on the South African setting, with particular attention to small rural towns, allowing for a critical interrogation of governance arrangements that are frequently marginalised within urban-centric planning scholarship. A structured search strategy was implemented across academic databases, government repositories, and municipal planning portals, using carefully selected Boolean search terms related to sustainable human settlements, spatial planning, SPLUMA, rural development, and stakeholder governance. The search was limited to English-language documents published between 2013 and 2025 to align with the post-SPLUMA legislative period. In line with PRISMA guidelines, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to ensure that only documents with substantive relevance to human settlements policy, spatial planning implementation, and stakeholder roles in rural or small-town contexts were retained, while metropolitan-focused, non-empirical, or opinion-based sources were excluded. Document screening followed a multi-stage process involving title and abstract review, full-text assessment, and the removal of duplicates, resulting in a curated dataset of legislation, policy frameworks, and implementation reports. Throughout the process, PRISMA principles enhanced transparency and credibility by ensuring a clearly documented search strategy, explicit eligibility criteria, a traceable screening process, and systematic data extraction, thereby strengthening the reliability and transferability of the findings to comparable rural planning and governance contexts.

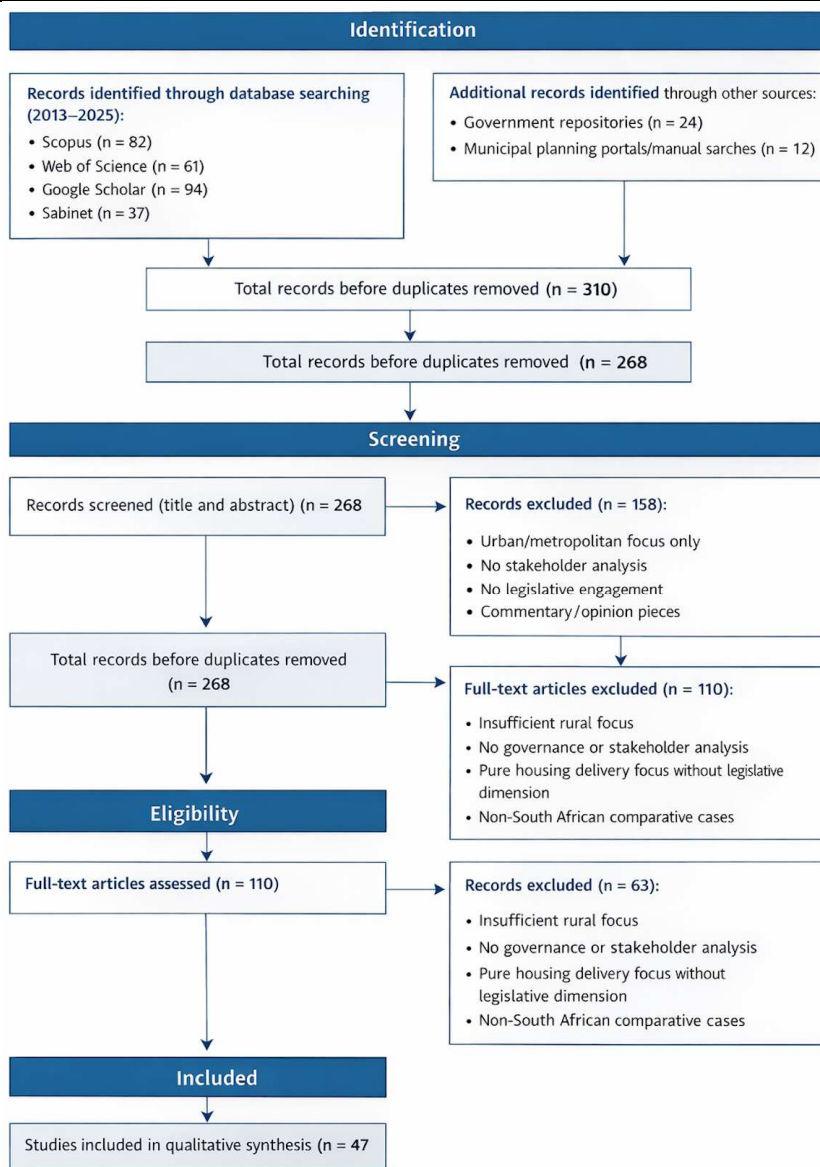


Figure 1: Research Process

## 5 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

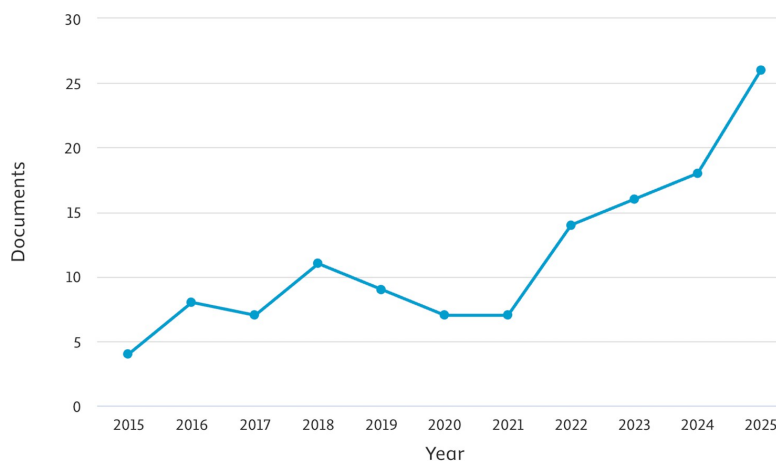


Figure 2: Publication Trend

Figure 2 illustrates the temporal distribution of documents related to sustainable human settlements, governance, and spatial planning between 2015 and 2025. The findings reveal a gradual but uneven growth trajectory, with relatively modest publication outputs between 2015 and 2020, followed by a marked

acceleration from 2022 onwards. The early period (2015–2017) reflects a foundational phase in which scholarly attention to sustainable human settlements was largely shaped by post-2015 global policy shifts, particularly the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the New Urban Agenda (NUA) (UN-Habitat, 2016). During this period, research was predominantly conceptual and urban-centric, with limited empirical engagement with rural and small-town settings in South Africa. This aligns with critiques that early sustainability discourses tended to privilege metropolitan regions while marginalising rural governance realities.

A noticeable increase in outputs occurs between 2018 and 2019, coinciding with growing scholarly interrogation of SPLUMA's implementation challenges and the persistent limitation between progressive planning legislation and on-the-ground outcomes. However, this momentum briefly stagnates between 2020 and 2021, likely reflecting disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and the redirection of research agendas toward emergency governance and public health concerns. The most significant finding is the sharp rise in publications from 2022 to 2025, peaking in 2025. This surge suggests a renewed and intensified interest in governance, spatial justice, and inclusive development, particularly within the Global South. Importantly, this period corresponds with increasing policy fatigue around implementation failures, growing service delivery protests in small towns, and heightened scrutiny of local government capacity in South Africa. The temporal trend thus supports the research's argument that sustainable human settlements have moved from a normative policy aspiration toward a contested implementation arena, especially in rural and small-town settings.

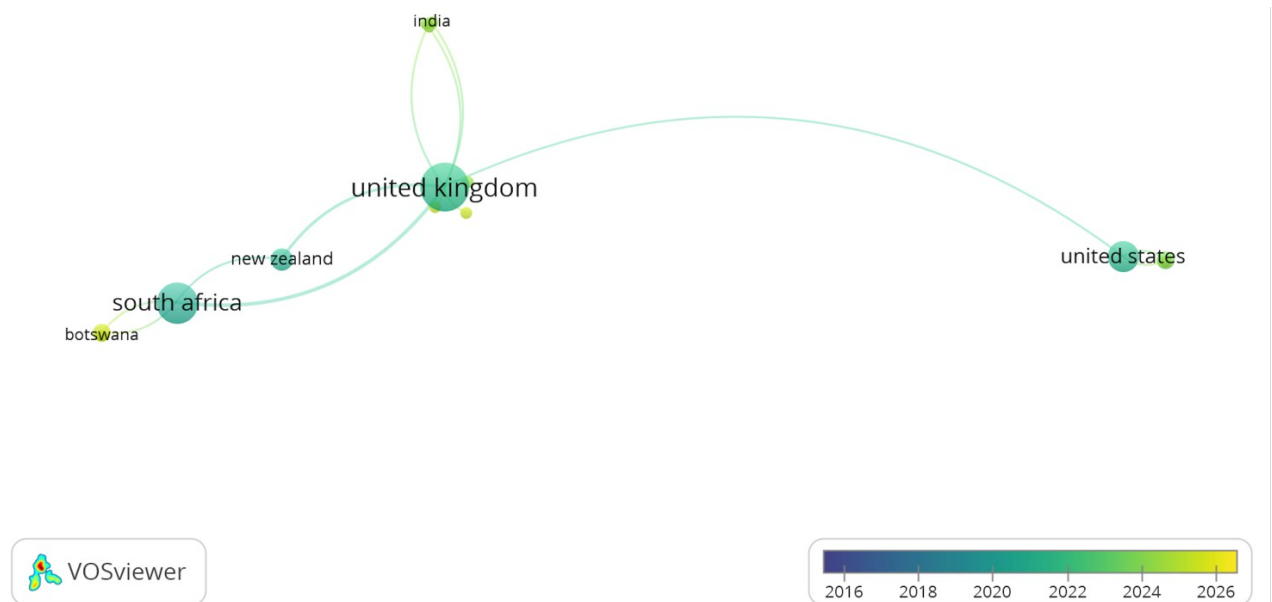


Figure 3: Countries

Figure 3 illustrates country-level co-authorship patterns, revealing distinct geographic asymmetries in the production of knowledge on sustainable human settlements. The United Kingdom emerges as the most prominent hub, exhibiting strong collaborative ties with South Africa, the United States, and New Zealand. South Africa occupies a secondary but significant position, while other African countries, such as Botswana, appear marginally connected. This pattern highlights a continued Global North–Global South knowledge hierarchy, where research agendas, theoretical frameworks, and methodological approaches are often shaped by institutions located in the Global North. While South Africa's relatively strong presence reflects its advanced planning legislation and academic infrastructure, the limited intra-African collaboration highlights the fragmentation of regional knowledge systems on rural human settlements. The dominance of the UK–South Africa axis suggests that much of the critical engagement with SPLUMA, governance, and spatial justice is mediated through external academic networks. While such collaboration can enhance theoretical rigour, it also raises concerns about the contextual grounding of policy prescriptions, particularly for small rural towns with unique socio-institutional configurations. Importantly, the marginal positioning of other African states reinforces the research's argument that small rural towns remain analytically peripheral, even within Global South scholarship. This finding strengthens the case for a stakeholder-centred and rural-

responsive framework that is grounded in local governance realities rather than imported planning orthodoxies.

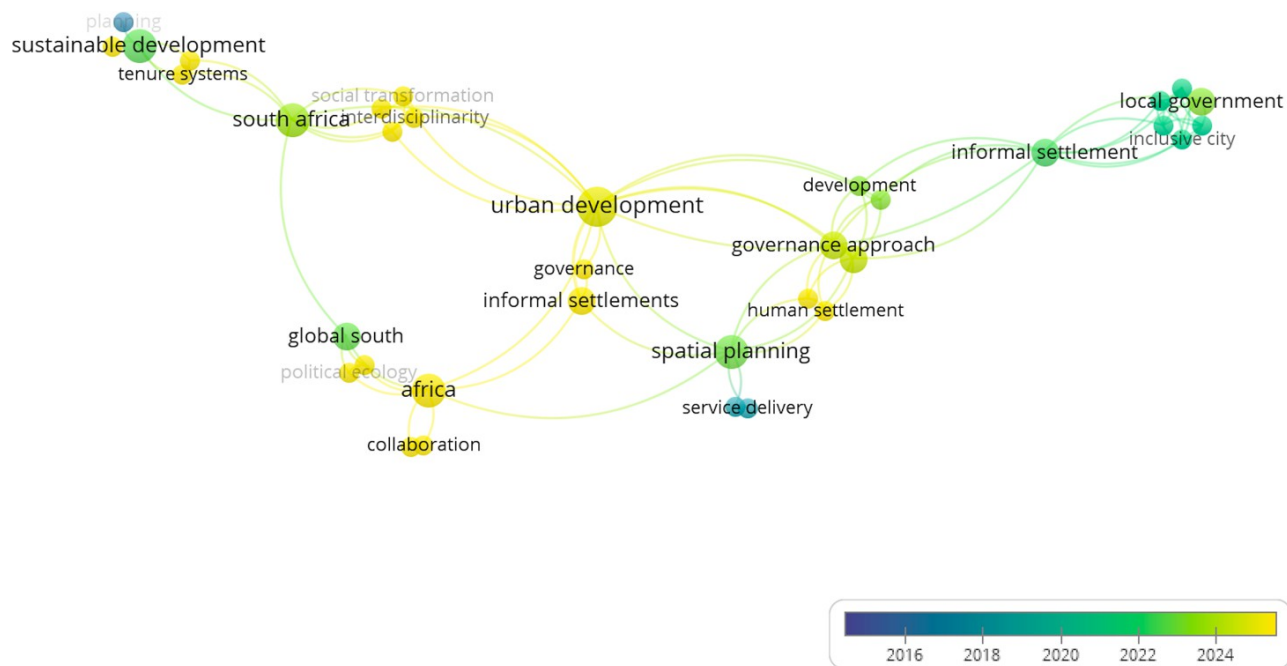


Figure 4: Keywords

Figure 4 presents a keyword co-occurrence network generated through VOSviewer, revealing the dominant thematic clusters shaping the discourse on sustainable human settlements. The analysis identifies urban development, spatial planning, and governance as central and highly connected nodes, highlighting their foundational role in the literature. Despite the works' focus on small rural towns, the prominence of "urban development" as the most central node reflects a persistent urban bias in planning research. This finding echoes longstanding critiques that policy frameworks such as the NDP and IUDF, while rhetorically inclusive, are underpinned by urban spatial imaginaries that inadequately translate to rural settlement dynamics. The strong linkage between urban development and governance further suggests that governance debates remain framed within urban administrative and institutional logics.

The cluster connecting spatial planning, human settlement, and service delivery reflects an applied policy orientation, particularly in relation to SPLUMA's objectives of spatial justice, efficiency, and sustainability (Republic of South Africa, 2013). However, the relatively weaker positioning of service delivery within the network signals a disjuncture between planning intent and lived implementation outcomes, a limitation widely documented in rural municipalities characterised by limited technical capacity and fiscal constraints. Notably, the presence of "informal settlement(s)", "inclusive city", and "local government" as interconnected but peripheral nodes suggests that informality and inclusion are treated as sectoral or thematic sub-issues rather than as central structuring conditions of human settlements. This is particularly problematic for small rural towns, where informality often takes hybrid forms linked to traditional land tenure systems and weak regulatory enforcement. The visibility of "tenure systems", "traditional leadership" (implicitly linked through governance and Africa-focused nodes), and "collaboration" further reinforces the work's argument that institutional complexity and overlapping authorities remain insufficiently theorised and operationalised in planning practice. The fragmented nature of these nodes reflects the absence of coherent legislative mechanisms for shared governance, especially in areas under traditional authority, despite SPLUMA's stated intent to promote inclusive and participatory planning.

## 6 TOWARDS THE INTEGRATED RURAL HUMAN SETTLEMENTS FRAMEWORK (IRHSF)

Based on the findings of this study, this section presents targeted recommendations aimed at strengthening the implementation of sustainable human settlements in small rural towns. The recommendations focus on addressing identified policy, institutional, and stakeholder-related gaps, with the intention of enhancing coordination, inclusivity, and practical effectiveness in planning and implementation processes.

The proposed recommendations, as shown in Table 1, collectively advance a shift from compliance-driven implementation toward collaborative governance of sustainable human settlements in South Africa's small rural towns. Rather than introducing new policy instruments, the framework stresses the reconfiguration of existing legislative and institutional arrangements to better reflect rural realities and multi-actor governance dynamics. Central to the framework is the strengthening of intergovernmental and cross-sectoral coordination, particularly at the district level where planning, housing, and rural development functions intersect. Through positioning district municipalities as coordination nodes, the recommendations respond directly to the fragmented institutional landscape identified in the findings and support more coherent vertical and horizontal alignment across governance spheres. This approach is consistent with SPLUMA's objective on integrated development but extends it by foregrounding operational collaboration rather than procedural compliance. A contribution of the framework lies in its explicit recognition of traditional leadership and community-based structures as integral governance actors. Through advocating for structured co-planning and strengthened participatory mechanisms, the recommendations move beyond symbolic inclusion toward meaningful engagement in decision-making. This responds to long-standing critiques of exclusionary planning practices in areas under traditional authority and reinforces the legitimacy and sustainability of settlement interventions. The framework also acknowledges that sustainable human settlements in small rural towns cannot be delivered by the state alone. Through promoting structured engagement with private and civil society actors, this work supports more diversified delivery models while maintaining public oversight. This balance between collaboration and accountability is essential for addressing capacity constraints without undermining developmental objectives. Overall, the recommendations reinforce the paper's central argument that achieving sustainable human settlements in small rural towns requires institutional alignment, stakeholder clarity, and rural-sensitive planning approaches, rather than new policy ambitions. Through offering a practical, stakeholder-centred framework grounded in existing legislation, the study contributes to debates on inclusive governance, spatial justice, and the localisation of planning policy in South Africa.

Finding	Recommended Action	Lead Stakeholders	Expected Outcome
Fragmented coordination among institutions	Establish a multi-stakeholder coordination forum at district level	National & Provincial DHS, District and Local Municipalities	Improved alignment and coordinated implementation
Legislative misalignment across planning and housing frameworks	Harmonise SPLUMA, Housing Act, and rural development policies through implementation guidelines	National DHS, COGTA,	Clear and coherent rural settlement implementation
Limited integration of traditional leadership	Formalise municipal– traditional authority co- planning arrangements	Local Municipalities, Traditional Councils	Inclusive and context- responsive planning
Unclear stakeholder roles and accountability	Clarify stakeholder responsibilities within municipal plans (SDFs and HSPs)	Local Municipalities, Provincial Planning Units	Stronger accountability and role clarity
Urban-biased planning approaches	Develop rural-specific planning guidelines for small towns	National DHS	Planning tools suited to rural realities
Weak engagement of private and civil society actors	Promote structured public– private– community partnerships	Municipalities, Private Sector, NGOs	Enhanced delivery capacity and innovation
Limited community participation in decision- making	Strengthen participatory mechanisms in settlement planning	Municipalities, Ward Committees, Communities	Increased local ownership and legitimacy

Table 1: Integrated Rural Human Settlements Framework (IRHSF)

## 7 CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that while South Africa's legislative and policy frameworks for sustainable human settlements articulate progressive principles of spatial justice, inclusion, and cooperative governance, their implementation in small rural towns remains uneven and constrained. The findings highlight how institutional fragmentation, limited local capacity, weak stakeholder coordination, and ambiguous integration of traditional authorities undermine the translation of policy intent into practice. Through applying a stakeholder-centred legislative lens, the research shows that implementation outcomes are shaped not only by the design of policies and laws but by how diverse actors interpret, negotiate, and operationalise these mandates within complex rural governance environments. The proposed framework responds to these challenges by clarifying roles, strengthening vertical and horizontal collaboration, and promoting legislative alignment.

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