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Problematizing the rural spaces and positioning in the context of rural development: Case of Eshowe in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Rural spaces and positioning can have a significant impact on rural development, but only if the individuals engaged receive the necessary assistance. To problematize rural spaces and positioning in the context of rural development, this study was carried out in four rural spaces of Eshowe in the local municipality of uMlalazi in South Africa. This paper argues that rural spaces offer a plethora of opportunities for investment and social cohesion for the livelihood of members of the self-help groups. Often, researchers focus on the impact and challenges of the enterprise, with little focus on how these groups are developed for the creation of other economic generating opportunities in rural communities. This study therefore aimed to provide the guidance that rural spaces might require for the activities they execute in the context of rural development. This paper seeks to understand the challenges that the rural spaces and positioning in the uMlalazi municipality encountered. This study was carried out in the uMlalazi local municipality's rural areas, which are positioned in KwaZulu-Natal in Eshowe. In the interest of advancing women in this local municipality, programmes are being run in rural spaces. Both theory and document analysis are employed in this paper to examine this phenomenon. Focus group discussions and structured interviews were employed as part of a qualitative research methodology to gather data for the study. The interviews mainly covered the structures of organisation, activities, and functions that these self-help groups play in the different communities they serve. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The investigation's research design was a qualitative study method. The findings suggest that there are challenges that the rural spaces and positioning encounter in fostering rural development.

Keywords: positioning, rural development, rural spaces, South Africa

RÉSUMÉ

Les espaces ruraux et le positionnement peuvent avoir un impact significatif sur le développement rural, mais uniquement si les individus impliqués reçoivent l'assistance nécessaire. Pour problématiser les espaces ruraux et le positionnement dans le contexte du développement rural, cette étude a été menée dans quatre espaces ruraux d'Eshowe, dans la municipalité locale d'uMlalazi en Afrique du Sud. Cet article soutient que les espaces ruraux offrent une multitude d'opportunités pour l'investissement et la cohésion sociale pour les moyens de subsistance

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des membres des groupes d'entraide. Souvent, les chercheurs se concentrent sur l'impact et les défis de l'entreprise, avec peu d'accent sur la manière dont ces groupes sont développés pour la création d'autres opportunités économiques dans les communautés rurales. Cette étude visait donc à fournir des orientations dont les espaces ruraux pourraient avoir besoin pour les activités qu'ils mènent dans le contexte du développement rural. Cet article cherche à comprendre les défis rencontrés par les espaces ruraux et le positionnement dans la municipalité d'uMlalazi. L'étude a été menée dans les zones rurales de la municipalité locale d'uMlalazi, situées au KwaZulu-Natal, à Eshowe. Dans l'intérêt de promouvoir les femmes dans cette municipalité locale, des programmes sont menés dans les espaces ruraux. Cet article utilise à la fois la théorie et l'analyse documentaire pour examiner ce phénomène. Des discussions de groupe et des entretiens structurés ont été utilisés comme méthodologie de recherche qualitative pour recueillir les données de l'étude. Les entretiens ont principalement porté sur les structures organisationnelles, les activités et les fonctions que ces groupes d'entraide jouent dans les différentes communautés qu'ils desservent. Les données ont été analysées par analyse thématique. Le design de recherche de l'enquête était une méthode d'étude qualitative. Les résultats suggèrent qu'il existe des défis que les espaces ruraux et le positionnement rencontrent pour favoriser le développement rural.

Mots-clés : positionnement, développement rural, espaces ruraux, Afrique du Sud

Introduction

The study explored the challenges to rural spaces in the positioning of rural development, using Eshowe in KwaZulu-Natal as a case study. Rural areas play a crucial role in global sustainability and development, yet they are often marginalized and overlooked compared to urban centres. Rural development is not only required for the progression of rural areas, but it is also essential for maintaining ecological balance and preserving the environment. However, the process of rural development is often oversimplified and generalized, disregarding the complex social, economic, and environmental contexts of rural spaces. In the context above, it is imperative to problematize the rural spaces and reposition them in the discourse of rural development. The developmental discourse involves a critical evaluation of the existing approaches to rural development, examining their limitations, and proposing alternative strategies that account for the unique conditions and needs of rural communities. This paper explores the challenges of rural development and provides insights on how to rethink rural spaces to generate inclusive and sustainable development. The perception that nothing exists outside of and independently of the dominant metropolitan world is reinforced

by the gaze of global urbanization and the frequent portrayal of rural areas as dependent on cities (Ruddick *et al.*, 2018).

Rural development plans have a larger focus on neo-endogenous techniques and practices as a result of socio-economic structural change (Neumeier, 2012; Navarro Valverde, 2019). Additionally, for the region to profit from the commercial exploitation of its resources, residents of that rural space must be part of this course (Dinis, 2006) and by mobilizing actors whose participation may also result in social, economic, and cultural renewal (Neumeier, 2012). The purpose of this study is to provide the guidance that rural women might require for the activities they execute in the context of rural development. Innovation, as a component that encourages difference, change, and/or exclusivity, will establish a dominant force in the rural space, providing superior and significant advantages for rural businesses (Dinis, 2006; Tunney, 2015). Mahroum *et al.* (2007) define rural innovation as the introduction of something new (a novel change) to economic or social life for rural spaces that adds new economic or social value to rural life.

In this regard, it makes sense that the process of rural innovation should incorporate a variety of actors, active involvement of local stakeholders, and cooperative actions (Brunoi *et al.*, 2008, Labianca *et al.*, 2020). According to Neumeier (2012; 2017), social innovation is concerned with a group of people's evolving views, behaviours, or perceptions within the framework of a network of shared interests that results in some sort of observable improvement for the actors engaged or even further. In other words, it enhances the rural community's economic or social worth, which is the aim of rural innovation.

According to Neumeier (2012; 2017), it encompasses the following three phases: problematization (where a person or initial group identifies a problem, or a need, and seeks a solution); expression of interest (where additional actors are included considering they see a benefit in working together); and delineation and coordination (where a new collaborative form and development strategy are born). In particular, it helps to develop stakeholders' capacity to reflect on the material and immaterial resources that are essential to the social and economic development of the area. The women in these rural areas are actively engaged in numerous initiatives to improve the socioeconomic conditions, and they have even established Self-Help Groups (SHGs) for Ukonga. The SHGs save two Rand, and these savings enable them to launch programs aimed at reducing poverty and providing their homes with a stable source of income.

Theoretical framework- Problematizing the rural spaces and positioning in the context of rural development.

This paper presents a literature review and theoretical framework that informed this study which can assist in understanding the rural spaces and positioning for rural developments in the case of Eshowe. Environmental governance has placed a strong emphasis on the value of broader public, rural community, and stakeholder participation in decision-making for several decades (Renn, 2006). However, there is still a great deal of confusion on

who should participate and how deliberation should be organised, both in theory and reality (Arnstein 1969; Renn, 2006; CTSA Consortium, 2011).

Various elements, such as where and the scope of the project, may affect phrases, such as "public," "stakeholder," "the community," "participation," "deliberation," and "engagement," are used and appropriate. Due to the complexity and diversity of rural areas, there is a wide range of scholarly research on these areas. Research is starting to emerge on rural activities (including employment), "rural" activities like agriculture, and farming in rural areas, comprehending the interdependence between these two domains, and finally the livelihoods and resource-management issues at the rural-urban interface. Problematizing rural spaces and positioning them in the context of rural development is a concept that involves critically examining the issues related to the development of rural areas. It acknowledges that rural spaces are complex and diverse and that their development requires a nuanced understanding of the social, economic, and environmental factors that shape them. At the heart of this concept is the understanding that rural areas are not homogenous, and their development must take into account the unique challenges and opportunities that exist within each community. This means that strategies for rural development must be tailored to local needs, and account for the specificities of each area (Dyson and Jeffrey, 2022).

Central to problematizing rural spaces is the recognition that urban-centric development models are often inappropriate for rural areas. Instead, rural development should be viewed as an integrated approach that focuses on enhancing economic opportunities, improving infrastructure, and strengthening social and environmental sustainability (Gold, 2017). Positioning rural development within this context requires a critical examination of the political, economic, and social processes that

shape rural areas. It requires a focus on social justice, environmental sustainability, and economic empowerment to ensure that development initiatives are inclusive, equitable, and sustainable (Rai, 2022).

Ultimately, problematizing the rural spaces and positioning them in the context of rural development is about recognising the diversity and complexity of rural areas and taking a comprehensive approach to development that builds on local strengths and addresses local challenges. It is about crafting strategies that are tailored to local needs and that support the long-term sustainability of rural communities. Problematizing rural spaces and positioning them in the context of rural development is a concept that involves critically examining the issues related to the development of rural areas. This means that strategies for rural development must be tailored to local needs, and account for the specificities of each area (Dyson and Jeffrey, 2022).

Sustainable Livelihood Approach. The sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) improves understanding of the livelihoods of the poor. It organizes the factors that constrain or enhance livelihood opportunities and shows how they relate (Serrat and Serrat, 2017; Dang et al., 2020). Indeed SLA can help with the plan of rural development activities and assess the contribution towards the existing activities that are made to sustain rural livelihoods. This study adopted the SLA for rural places to alleviate poverty and betterment of the study area.

Poverty remains one of the big demanding situations for inclusive growth since the independence of South African and for the country to compete with the global situation (Bianchi and de Man, 2021). These rural spaces are experiencing poverty, social ills and unemployment which is why SHGs came up with the idea of saving two Rands and to foster cooperations.

The women of Nkanini area are having gardens, farming, and individual businesses from the saving of two rands. Accessing proper funding for the poor is first-order condition for poverty alleviation and sustainable rural development for the study area. The important thrust of the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) is that the poor have inherent potential and a robust desire to get out of poverty (Tersoo, 2014; Sahu, and Kumar, 2021). The poor communities and their establishments are not provided with enough capacities to control the outside surroundings that can enable them to get entry to finance and to amplify their talents such as starting gardens, farming and belongings to convert them into reminiscent livelihoods (Chamberlain, and Anseeuw, 2019). As such NRLM necessitates continuous close help to them through the facilitators and coordinators of these projects. The focal point of Rural Livelihoods is the complete inclusion of the marginalized communities, prioritizing the poorest and converting the SHGs into institutions of the poor that are supported to leverage working together (Andrews et al., 2021). The advantages for SHGs might increase innovative network and create interventions that could lead to sustainable livelihoods and higher level of livelihoods. This study adopted the SLA for the rural area of Eshowe under uMlalazi local municipality for rural development in order to assist women in this study area.

The women from Nkanini came up with these projects in order to alleviate poverty and to put food on the table for their families. Community-led development is a people-centred approach to social change where facilitators and coordinators play a leading role in conceptualizing projects and programmes geared to social and economic needs such as special social fund projects for poverty alleviation, sustainability, social services, social and economic infrastructure, more inclusive democracy. Development of social capital, strengthening of governance. This calls for extensive cooperation

between stakeholders to achieve greater resources efficiency and beneficiaries are actively involved in project design and management (Bumbalová *et al.*, 2016; Paula, 2019).

If measures are not taken to enhance the capabilities of rural spaces-based grassroots agencies controlled via Self Help Groups, it will be very difficult to increase the individual income of rural household as well as the financial improvement of the nation (Hu, 2015; Reese, 2015).

Social cohesion Theory. This study sought to integrate the literature on the social economy and social capital in the context of non-profits-led community development programs. Leveraging a case illustration of a cross-national partnership between communities this paper also provides a unique opportunity to study the intersection between normative views of social economy and social capital and more critical approaches to these constructs in practice (Mason, 2020). This paper employed the social capital theory (SCT) which could be able to address the challenges of rural development within the study area.

Theories of the social economy and social capital, and their relationship to community development, are distinct but overlapping frameworks that attempt to provide insights to community action (Mason, 2020). The role of non-profit and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in facilitating both the social economy and social capital has also been taken for granted in community development studies (Mason, 2020). Women are often excluded from many discussions on social capital and the social economy, although women and the family have always been central to community life and play a great role.

This paper is problematizing the role of women in rural development to benefit the study area. Livelihoods provide an opportunity to explore theoretical ideas regarding how residents mobilise social capital to secure livelihood sovereignty during the dynamic economic transition, climate instability, and socio-cultural change (Naylor, *et al.*, 2021).

Our rich ethnographic descriptions outline the unique contributions of bonding, bridging, and linking forms of social capital to this process of development and innovation.

Research approach. The research challenges for this study were addressed using a qualitative method approach. A qualitative approach aims to present in-depth and illustrative knowledge to describe the numerous facets of the topic under investigation (Queiros, *et al.*, 2017). According to Maxwell (2013), qualitative research examines the universe of meanings, intentions, ambitions, convictions, principles, and behaviours that when taken as a whole give rise to an additional dimension of relationships, processes, and phenomena that cannot be reduced to variable operationalization.

Additionally, spoken and written words as well as observable behaviours of people constitute illustrations for descriptive data from qualitative research (Watts *et al.*, 2017). The primary objective of the collection of descriptive data is to gain an understanding of the distinctive thoughts of individuals or groups. This strategy is recommended because it allows for face-to-face semi-structured interviews, the collection and analysis of statistical data, as well as the narrative from the participants.

To gather authentic information from the participants, a qualitative approach was adopted. Participants in the interviews did so of their own free will; participation was not required. Researchers conducted these in-person interviews with them at their homes, gardens, KRCC offices, and tribal authority offices. A semi-structured interview, according to Longhurst (2003) is a conversation in which one of the participants (the interviewer) attempts to elicit information from a different party by asking questions. Even if the interviewer has prepared a list of questions, semi-structured interviews are conversational in character and provide participants with the ability to bring up any subjects they feel are important.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen over structured interviews for this study's qualitative design given that they offer enough flexibility and make it simpler to approach various participants in different ways while still collecting data from the same areas (Noor, 2008). To learn more about the initiatives that the Qalakabusha group is working on and even the two rands that they were saving as SHGs, semi-structured interviews with them were performed. An interview guide had been created, and it featured a list of topics and questions to be covered during the interview. Since only a few notes can be taken during an interview, all of the material was recorded on tape to ensure accurate storage, access, and recording of the interaction.

The problematization of rural areas and placement in the context of rural development at the local municipality of uMlalazi is necessary for this paper. Tribal leaders, SHG facilitators, women from rural areas like Nkanini (Qalakabusha), and SHG leaders made up the sample of participants for this study. The researchers chose to use the uMlalazi local municipality after considering the positions of the rural spaces. The study's methodological strategy and tactics are detailed in this section. The target population, sampling design and methods, sample size, data collection and analysis, validity and reliability, and research design are included.

Data collection were carried out using a survey approach that had conformity with the qualitative method approach. The researchers also benefited from selecting a sample of participants and giving each member of the sample the same interview guide.

According to Ntshangase and Ezeuduji (2019; 2020), a descriptive survey design can be used to analyse a participant's characteristics and look for potential answers to study problems. During this time, the researchers conducted semi-structured and in-person interviews to gather data. Only those who agreed and were readily accessible were asked to participate in the study, together with the members of these SHGs and the extension officers.

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis, a qualitative computer-assisted data analysis technique. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data, allowing the researchers to identify recurring themes in the open-ended responses. The study used the common threads to develop themes and/or sub-themes from which the analysis was derived. To answer the questions and fulfil the study's objectives, the data were primarily evaluated. Data analysis, in the judgment of researchers such as Buschle, Reiter and Bethmann (2022) does not offer all answers to research issues, but it does describe the accomplishment of goals and offer responses to them.

Findings and Discussion

Nkanini village: Selected Narratives. The excerpts provided below are taken from interviews with the Qalakabusha SHGs and three other significant stakeholders who were instrumental in the formation and long-term success of the organization. The excerpts demonstrated the key issues that emerged frequently in the interviews and were noted as prevalent themes throughout the study. The participants' roles as nurturers and providers for their respective families and communities were the main topic of the interviews. The interviews also emphasized the driving forces for launching the SHGs program and the significance of support from influential parties for community development and fighting social evils that continue to wreak havoc the area as a result of poverty. The following subjects emerged from the data analysis process: skills transfer, social cohesiveness, women's economic independence, and mobilization of savings. The Qalakabusha SHGs members will be referred to as "members" to maintain the participants' anonymity, and the other participants will be referred to as they appear in Table 1.

Saving mobilisation. Women in the community can engage in economic activities that fulfil the

Table 1. Categories of the sample

Participant (SHG)	Sample size	Gender	Occupation status
Facilitators of SHGs	2	Females	Unemployed
Tribal authority	1	Male	Employed
Qalakabusha (Nkanini)	7	Females	
Founder	1	Male	Employed

Source: Author's own work

fundamental requirements of their families in a significant way through the mobilization of their savings. Women who participate in the savings mobilization can save as little as R2 per week, which they can use as collateral for loans to carry out household tasks. One of the SHG members who participated in the survey stated:

"Being an affiliate of the association has been a blessing for me. I acquired a lot of benefits from the R2 weekly savings since I was able to obtain a loan and purchase stock to launch my own business. Considering the interest rate was only 10%, I could afford it and repay it with the money I was making. To buy additional stock, I took out another loan, which I was also able to repay. Today, I constructed a home for myself that has a septic tank and an ensuite bathroom. I always feel delighted because I can now flush my toilet and avoid going outside at night to use the restroom, which I never thought I would be able to do."

The excerpt above demonstrated the effectiveness of mobilizing savings and how it helped a woman attain her potential as an entrepreneur. She was able to construct a house, something she had never imagined being possible in a village, as her business prospered. This illustrated the ability of the community to drive economic growth in a rural area like Nkanini. [Hendricks \(2016\)](#) asserts that rural women are essential to the growth of their communities. This affirms the role played by the SHG in providing women with the chance to become leaders in their communities and propel certain areas toward development.

Women's economic freedom. Women's economic freedom dominated the debate among all the participants. The SHG initiative was initiated in Nkanini for just this reason. Women in rural areas are frequently described as docile and dependent on men for basic needs. The SHG program has revealed the power that women have as nurturers for their families and the economy, dispelling this concept of being quite naive. The SHG initiative's founder in Nkanini claimed the following:

"In light of the need for self-help groups in a struggling neighbourhood. Thus, the demand to promote women's economic empowerment evolved. When abuse occurs, it often stems from the fact that the victim is dependent on the abuser and has little money. They are requesting anything. They have to request even small things. In contrast to the typical' submissiveness of women at home, this caused them to be little and submissive in a terrible sense."

The excerpt above highlights the social problems that are common in rural areas as a result of unemployment and poverty. Since they are frequently dependent on men to achieve their fundamental requirements, women in impoverished areas are frequently the victims of numerous afflictions, including sickness, abuse, and maltreatment by men. Thus, by empowering women through economic freedom, the dependency is removed, resulting in more independent women who can support themselves. The following was stated by one of the Qalakabusha SHG facilitators:

"The SHG has been a huge assistance in assisting women in providing for their families. Considering the majority of the women are without jobs, the organization can provide for their daily necessities. You can tell that since the group's founding, their families have improved, and the women are happier. Some people have even launched their enterprises using loans obtained from savings mobilization. Our loan mechanism is secure, and the women reimburse the money following the terms of the loans."

The excerpt above shows how empowering women has a significant impact on the advancement of women in our local communities. The social ills connected to poverty are lessened when women are given more influence. According to [Masoga and Shokane \(2019\)](#) "Women find ways to defend themselves against the persistent problems of poverty, resource deficiency,

unemployment, sporadic water scarcity, inadequate school support for their children, and the HIV pandemic by organizing and mobilizing each other in collective leadership."

The latter emphasizes once again how powerful women become as a result of economic freedom for the benefit of their communities. Additionally, since the majority of women in rural areas are unable to obtain loans from commercial banks, the financing system that these organizations employ enables women to start enterprises and engage in other endeavours that create income for their families.

Social Cohesion. Perhaps the most important aspects influencing local economic growth is social cohesion. Much may be accomplished when people work together and toward a common objective, which benefits the entire community. As much may be attained via unity, social cohesion has really been viewed as one of the most beneficial improvements. The women in Nkanini reported that the group structures fostered a strong sense of female bonding. Although it is generally believed that women do not assist one another very often, this SHG showed that they can come together for the benefit of all. The following was stated by one of the Qalakabusha SHG members:

"Since the group's establishing, women in this community have grown stronger together. We are able to communicate our experiences and offer each other support when appropriate. We have erected a tank at one of the schools where we are particularly active to help the community with its water problems. By doing this, we can collaborate as a team and inspire other women to participate in initiatives like ours."

The excerpt above illustrates the advantages of social cohesion and all the advantageous outcomes that may be realized. According to Manca (2014), social cohesiveness strives to foster connections and solidarity among groups to lessen inequality and socioeconomic gaps in society. The members of the Qalakabusha SHG have found comfort in one another since they share the same objective of caring for their families and being self-sufficient financially. As a result, prospects for entrepreneurship in the rural Nkanini area

have opened up for some.

Skills Transfer. In rural areas, expertise transfer creates the foundation for community independence and reduces reliance on government assistance. Communities that have the necessary abilities can take advantage of opportunities that will eventually benefit the entire community and become sustainable. Through the many classes offered to them, the women learned skills including bookkeeping, management, writing, and interpersonal communication. The women also received construction training so they could build water tanks in important community buildings like schools and churches. The following was uttered by one of the facilitators:

"The sessions that the coordinators and facilitators provide help the ladies learn. The great thing is that, after receiving their training, they are able to mentor and inspire other local women to find their own groups. As a result, other organizations have begun, and they are also succeeding."

According to the outcomes stated above, SHG members have to cooperate together to achieve the desired results. Other women in the surrounding area value the skills the Qalakabusha SHG has acquired because they help them launch their own organizations and companies. The results are consistent with the Water Research Commission's report by Oladele and Mudhara (2016) which noted that women make up the majority of South Africa's agricultural workforce. However, current data suggests that women's output is constrained, among other things, by a lack of suitable skill development. In South Africa, the latter emphasizes the value of skills and the dissemination of these talents to rural women.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to understand the role that women play in their households through savings

mobilisation in rural areas. Poverty remains prevalent in many parts of South Africa and many communities still live under the poverty line. As a result, people in poverty-stricken areas depend on government grants to meet their basic needs. Furthermore, it is women who are often at the receiving end of social ills such as GBV and abuse due to their dependence nature in rural areas.

The concept of self-help groups was introduced in the rural area of Nkanini to capacitate women to start income-generating activities to combat poverty and lessen their dependency on support structures. From saving as little as R2 a week, the self-help groups have contributed to economic freedom to the women in the Nkanini community. Drawing perspectives from the sustainable livelihoods approach and the social capital theory, special focus was given to understanding how these self-help groups contributed to providing women with opportunities to become pillars of their families.

The analysis revealed four dominant themes that emerged post-focus group discussions with the key participants in this study. The themes were savings mobilization, women's economic freedom, social cohesion, and skills transfer assisted in unearthing the potential of rural areas for development and how women play an integral role in encouraging self-sufficiency and independence in the community of Nkanini. Lessons can be drawn from these women and implemented in other areas of South Africa which will encourage people to make use of the little that they have to start income-generating activities which will become sustainable.

Statement of No-Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicting interest in this paper.

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