

The Elusive 'Promised Land': South Africa's Rural Community Struggles After Thirty Years of Democracy

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Abstract: This study highlights the struggles of Black South Africans in rural communities, which define inequalities and socio-economic conditions thirty years after the first democratic elections in 1994, regardless of the ANC's promise of "a better life for all." The purpose of discussing these challenges was to explore selected areas relevant to these issues as a delimitation. A closer look at the socio-economic history of a people reveals factors and circumstances that either promote, sustain, or challenge the livelihoods of a society or community, as in South Africa, race and geographical location define social status and quality of life. Such circumstances have particularly affected Black South African rural communities, who continue to experience abject poverty and destitution. This points to a departure from the Batho Pele Principles, which aimed to focus on socio-economic development programmes. The data used was 'desktop' from secondary sources, reports, and policy papers deemed relevant to the study and related to the experiences and struggles of rural communities against inadequate education, sustainable livelihoods, water and sanitation, and health, among others. The study concluded that, despite the gains of democracy, more needs to be done. An Afrocentric perspective was preferred because it is suitable for conceptualising, operationalising, and understanding social human problems such as rural community struggles outside the confines of Eurocentric knowledge 'paternalism'. An Afrocentric method was used to present the findings of the study, based on the identified subtopics.

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Keywords: Afrocentricity, community struggles, destitution, livelihoods, transitional justice, democracy, development.

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the struggles faced by black rural communities in South Africa, which are experienced on a regular basis with no indication of solutions or redress, despite the democratic government's promises of a "better life for all" after thirty years of democracy. Although the dawn of democracy has seen some progress in dismantling apartheid tendencies, as outlined in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) (1994), most rural communities remain landless and continue to struggle to access basic necessities such as adequate education, healthcare, and clean running potable water. Meanwhile, traditional leaders, as custodians of rural administration, have been made to compete for this space with elected municipal councillors (Musitha et al., 2022).

According to Shillington (2012), the dispossession of rural black South Africans is closely linked to the history of the mineral revolution, which not only led to the emergence of the migrant labour system but also to the institutionalisation of discriminatory practices that manipulated and abused the dignity, labour, and land rights of black individuals. This, in turn, has contributed to their perpetual struggle for survival, leading to the social degeneration of the multicultural African values of Ubuntu, Africanness, communalism, and interdependence (Ngcukaitobi, 2018 and 2021). Kahn et al. (2018) support this view, stating that the Natives' Land Act (No. 38) of 1913 aggravated the moral degeneration of rural communities, dealt a fatal blow to their independence and harmonious existence, and formalised their political and socio-economic dispossession. Essentially, the Act further entrenched the disempowerment of rural black South Africans, destroyed their peasant-dependent

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lifestyle, and laid the groundwork for their rapid impoverishment, disempowerment, and social injustice (Gevisser, 2009).

These drastic political and socio-economic changes have greatly entrenched the struggles of rural communities against abject poverty, destitution, suffering, and the loss of self-image, self-pride, cultural identity, heritage, language, and history (Ani, 1995). Furthermore, these rapid negative transformations have disrupted traditional moral homogeneity, diminished moral inculcation, and led to the dereliction of traditions and cultures through the systematic depersonalisation of rural communities and their socio-economic organisation (Msuya, 2020). Admittedly, the period following 1994 witnessed a gradual transformation in the socio-economic life of rural communities, moving away from the injustices that were conceived and enacted by the so-called “passion of the rational man” (Europeans), who controlled and determined the welfare and destiny of Black South Africans through exclusive laws (Ani, 1995). According to Ngoepe, since 1994, the South African government has attempted to dismantle colonial and apartheid legislation in order to address land distribution. However, the land question remains a contentious issue that has benefitted certain groups or individuals with significant influence (Ngoepe, 2023).

The struggles of rural communities are exacerbated by the underdevelopment of rural areas, where access to adequate education, healthcare, and clean potable water remains part of racial, economic and social exclusion (Brown, 2022). As a result, rural communities optimistically hope for the promises of a “better life for all,” which resonated during the dawn of democracy, alongside the promises of transitional socio-economic justice in the biblical “land of milk and honey,” as enshrined in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP, 1994). Although, Kativhu et al. (2023) note that the post-apartheid South African government prioritises rural development to reverse apartheid's legacies of injustice, poverty, and Black marginalisation, the question remains: what challenges continue to perpetuate the struggles of South Africa’s rural communities after thirty years of democracy?

1.1 Theoretical framework

The study employs an Afrocentric perspective because it is suitable for conceptualising and operationalising (Pellerin, 2012) the struggles of rural communities without imposing knowledge ‘paternalism’. The author chose Afrocentric theory because its central tenets – grounding, orientation, and perspective – fit within the analytical paradigm of rural community struggles (Mahosi, 2020) and the prophetic vision of a ‘better life for all’. In addition, Afrocentric theory resonates with the experiences of Black South African rural communities, who share a historical and sentimental connection to their socio-economic life, which is premised on the African values of Ubuntu and communalism, interdependence, and caring for one another – values that were disrupted by the advent of colonialism and apartheid. Rural Black South African communities entered the post-apartheid (post-1994) era with the expectation of a “better life for all” (RDP, 1994) and a return to the African values of Ubuntu (humanness), communalism, and interdependence (Ani, 1995; Pityana, 1999; Teffo, 1999). The author of this article draws from Afrocentric scholars like Modupe (2003) and Mazama (2003), who emphasise the reassertion of African agency when discussing African value systems of cooperation, selflessness, and communalism.

Furthermore, this Afrocentric article provides a space for the African voice, which has been stifled and excluded from Eurocentric/Western and Liberal discourses (Mahosi, 2020). This article aims to amplify this previously marginalised voice of rural people regarding their own identities, whose roots lie in African tradition, legacy and heritage, its values, institutions, and relationships which are those of precolonial times (Mbeki, 2001). However, Afrocentricity does not wholly reject the utility value of other Western theories in knowledge production; instead, it challenges their falsely universal applicability and dominance, providing an alternative perspective that centres the African voice on their cultural values, customs, and traditions of Ubuntu and Africanness, as well as promoting social

cohesion and unity – a harmonious communal and interdependent existence (Msuya, 2020). Therefore, the Afrocentric perspective recognises the need to view Africa's cultures and history from their own centres and locations, proposing to validate, regenerate, create, and perpetuate African life and living, unhindered and informed by an African perspective or worldview (Bekerie, 1994).

2. Methodology

The author of this article adopted a qualitative research approach steeped in Afrocentricity, primarily based on the review of secondary data collected using the 'desktop' approach. The qualitative method relates to social sciences, human behaviour, and understanding while centring on the reality experienced by subjects such as rural communities and their struggles. As a 'desktop study,' it did not consider human and animal behaviour or employ questionnaires. Central to the tenets of Afrocentricity are grounding, orientation, and perspective; these tenets are applied as the analytical categories of the study. Revier (2001) and Shai (2021) assert that Afrocentric methodologies are intended to investigate pertinent research questions legitimately, effectively, truthfully, and inclusively, particularly those with embedded assumptions about the subject under discussion, which in this study is "Black South African rural community struggles thirty years after the dawn of democracy." In this regard, the author aims to build a complex and holistic picture while analysing words and detailed views in a natural setting (Creswell, 1988; Grbich, 2007). Lastly, Mkabela (2005) and Owusu and Mji (2013) opine that within the Afrocentric qualitative method, it is essential to emphasise the importance of examining the "African reality from the African perspective," which places Africa's socio-historical, political, and economic experience at the core. The author selected and used approximately fifty secondary sources, citing all the sources consulted during the writing of this article. The study undertakes a thematic and Afrocentric analysis of the data from these sources by recognising the African voice, focusing on the Afrocentric paradigm to avoid Eurocentric and racist interpretations.

3. Presentation of Discourse

3.1 Rural community struggles: The RDP, UNDP's SDGs, AU 2063 and NDP 2030

The dawn of democracy in South Africa happened against the backdrop of moral degeneration that was aggravated by apartheid, which was accompanied by an identity crisis, such that the era of democracy was a milestone for transformation. Therefore, Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance was appropriately embraced by the broader African leadership, with the understanding that identity, culture, social cohesion, and national reconciliation should precede the redress of the past after centuries of experiences of rural community struggles (Makgoba, 1999). Accompanying the focus in the academic discourse regarding the perpetual socio-economic struggle of rural communities was the publication of the RDP (1994), the ANC's policy framework, and the African Renaissance (Opportunities, Great Expectations and Challenges) (1998), all of which include the emancipation of women and the stemming of continued rural struggles in order to alleviate poverty (Mbeki, 1998). Importantly, the African Renaissance was conceived with an understanding that addressing the colonial imbalances of the past would need an appreciation that the post-colonial era was unavoidably pockmarked with negative experiences which turned the achievement of social cohesion and national reconciliation into a steep ascent. Therefore, the return to the tenets of African values was of primary importance, especially within the subject of "rural community struggles, thirty years into democracy in South Africa." The author makes reference to the fact that thirty years into democracy in South Africa, youth unemployment and generally unproductive rural land have made the struggle for rural communities intense, with levels of poverty increasing with the dawn of each day (Ashley & Carney, 1999; Scoones, 2007). Added to this is the contestation for control and administration of rural land that has pitted elected councillors against traditional leaders, as custodians of these areas, such that this has hampered service delivery, thus aggravating rural community struggles (Maswanganyi, 2024).

In this study, addressing the above challenges is unavoidably linked to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which the author has relatedly identified: (1) ending poverty in all its forms everywhere; (2) ending hunger by achieving food security, improving nutrition, and promoting sustainable agriculture; (3) ensuring healthy lives and promoting the well-being of children of all ages; (4) ensuring inclusive and equitable education as well as learning opportunities for all; (5) achieving gender equality by empowering women and girls; (6) ensuring availability and sustainability of water and sanitation for all; and (7) ensuring access to modern energy to promote sustainable economic growth, in line with the “United Nations Development Goals (UNDP): Time for Global Action for People and Planet: Sustainable Development Goals Fact Sheet, 2015.” The author identified the above as they directly speak to the redress of and are central to addressing rural community struggles in South Africa. Significantly, the UNDP SDGs (2015) have also been adopted by most African states within the broad spectrum of the African Union (AU), Commission’s African Agenda 2063 (2015) and are central to the socio-economic development initiatives of rural Africa, as adopted by Heads of State and Governments (2015).

The UNDP SDGs have been central to the conception of the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063, both of which share the focus with South Africa’s migration from the RDP (1994) to the National Development Goals (Stiglingh-Van Wyk, 2020). In the South African context, within the period between 1994 and 2024, the adoption of the NDP was meant to focus on 14 (fourteen) priority outcomes, some of which in this paper are: education, health, rural development, human settlement, social protection, social cohesion, and nation building (Stiglingh-Van Wyk, 2020). In this regard, Chapter 3 of the NDP 2030 focuses on reducing rural community struggles in the country by addressing rising unemployment, the prerequisite of which is better education outcomes, a healthier population, better located and maintained infrastructure, a sound social safety net, a capable state, and much lower levels of corruption to eliminate poverty and illiteracy (Stiglingh-Van Wyk, 2020).

The report of the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA) on “The Impact of Social Infrastructure on Economic Growth in Rural Communities” in South Africa (2024) gave an overview of the challenges of the ongoing struggles of rural communities. The report focused especially on the main sticking points which generally overlap into and influence poverty, which reflected on the general poor socio-economic conditions and the challenges of underdevelopment, especially in South Africa’s former homelands (Kativhu et. al., 2023). The author cannot help but appreciate that the issue of underdevelopment not only worsens poverty and destitution but has an overarching impact on the access to and provision of quality and adequate education. Furthermore, the issue of poverty is closely linked to the susceptibility of rural communities to illnesses and diseases, which cannot be separated from the challenge of the absence of health provision, poor and inadequate transport systems, the challenge of, and even absence of, energy supply, the absence of information and communication technology, as well as the problem of water and sanitation. All of these point to the general lack of infrastructure, which equally impacts the prospects of economic growth in the rural Black communities of South Africa, because of the frustrating levels of underdevelopment. Equally, all this translates into inequalities that define South African society, especially considering the prospects of access to amenities in the cities and towns by urban communities, whereas the same cannot be said about the struggling rural communities. Admittedly, in line with a ‘better life for all’, there have been substantial improvements in many communities in the provision of electricity, water, health care and other necessities, while many remain without, or even with inadequate, basic resources provided (Suttner, 2012). According to Neves (2017), although the democratic government has attempted to reverse these trends of destitution in rural areas, the injustices and marginalisation, as well as widespread poverty related to colonialism and apartheid, remain pervasive.

Conditions of destitution in the rural areas perpetuate conditions of poverty, and a lack of basic needs like shelter, food, and basic health services. This also points to one thing, and one thing in particular: a lack of accountability on the part of the three tiers of government regarding the development and

welfare of the rural poor communities. In addition, it boils down to the fact that local government, which is at the coalface of community development, is not living up to the mandate it receives from the electorate: the poor rural communities whose lives it is supposed to uplift in line with the promised 'land of milk and honey' and 'a better life for all.' In order for this to happen, rural development becomes essential as it entails the upliftment of the social, cultural, economic, and general livelihoods of rural people, and also provides the primary source of labour (Kativhu et. al., 2023). This could be critical to poverty alleviation and empowering rural communities, especially since poverty remains a definition of rural communities that continue to struggle socio-economically, and whose life patterns continue to worsen thirty years after the dawn of democracy in 1994. The responsibilities of the DBSA become very crucial to advance the development impact of South Africans by expanding access to development finance and effectively integrating and implementing sustainable development solutions to improve the quality of life of people through the development of social infrastructure (<https://www.dbsa.org>). Accompanying this is the mandate, vision, and mission which are underpinned by the core values of high performance, integrity, innovation, and service orientation, by expanding access to development finance, and effectively integrating and implementing sustainable development solutions (DBSA, 2023).

3.2 Sustainable livelihoods

The author understands livelihoods as relating to the capabilities and available resources, such as financial and other related assets that address the challenges to the means of living. Such conditions are deemed sustainable when they can adapt to inherent challenges, especially because the power base of these livelihoods relies on natural resources, which need to be protected and not undermined (Scoones, 1999). Therefore, the essence of the environment and its subordinate aspects, such as the weather and seasonal conditions, becomes crucial, since they either contribute to poverty-focused development or, alternatively, lead to degradation, thus affecting production and abundance, poverty lines, and employment levels. The author argues that these statements carry all the hallmarks of what was discussed in the preceding paragraph on the SDGs, the NDP 2030, and the AU's African Agenda 2063. In addition, with reference to the maxim of "a better life for all," the natural rights and socio-economic as well as political rights to tackle poverty, as enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996 (Republic of South Africa, 1996), also refer to human dignity, equality, human rights, and liberties. Therefore, within this context, there is a focus on the struggles of general rural communities, emphasising illiteracy and quality and equitable education, poverty alleviation, provision of quality running water, and sanitation, provision of primary health care, and other health matters, by making adequate health facilities available within a reasonable distance (Scoones, 1999; Scoones & Chambers, 2009). The author believes that the government's focus on sustainable livelihoods will significantly contribute to understanding the complex challenges of rural community struggles in relation to rural community development issues. The pertinent question is whether the government has been able to deliver on what has been included in the NDP (2012) and the RDP (1994) before it, during the thirty years of democracy in South Africa, given the transition from one policy document to another between the 1st and 6th administrations in South Africa.

3.3. Education

Quality education, if not adequate education, has become a luxury that rural struggling communities have come to consider, especially in view of the fact that the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen (DBSA, 2024). Although Black rural communities have some access to education, the challenge of access to equal education becomes a reality, considering that they have to contend with glaring challenges that would typically be experienced in an urban setting. The South African general public is aware of the numerous challenges facing rural communities in their struggle to survive and raise their children under trying circumstances. Their centres of education are associated with poor, rural and inadequate infrastructure, which leads to overcrowding in classes and poses a

challenge to an effective and efficient learning environment (Stats SA, 2017). Such is the nature of the rural struggle in education that results in teachers being not only overworked but also generally unable to deliver on their mandate when the end-of-year results are made public, especially at the exit level to tertiary level. The NDP 2030 (2012) also proposes a vision of education and training to ensure that all children benefit from high-quality education, particularly concerning languages, maths and sciences, with the ultimate aim of ensuring that 90% of learners pass these subjects with at least 50% by 2030 (NDP, 2030). This objective still proves to be elusive thirty years since the dawn of democracy, given that the pass mark is publicly touted at 30% nationally, although the Department of Basic Education claims it is between 50% and 59% (DBSA, 2023).

The struggle for adequate education also manifests as a result of a lack of sufficient funding to address such challenges through the provision of improved, if not modern, infrastructure. This has been highlighted by occasional reports of learners at primary level dying in pit toilets, as has been the case in rural provinces like Limpopo and the Eastern Cape (DBSA, 2024). Consequently, the rainy season becomes an insurmountable challenge due to the poor road infrastructure prevalent in rural areas, with bridges occasionally being washed out, resulting in learners often having to cross torrents, if not crocodile-infested rivers, to reach their schools or return home. Admittedly, the government has established a generally subsidised scholar transport system country-wide, with provincial governments in the Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga, and Limpopo even inviting assistance from the private sector through scholar modes of transport in the form of bicycles to mitigate transport challenges. Unfortunately, with the general Black South African rural population being impoverished and unemployed, when such modes of transport break down, the success story gets disrupted, alongside the poorly maintained rural road infrastructure. In the far-flung rural areas of Masisi and Madimbo in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, learning under trees has remained a 'normal' situation (DBSA, 2024). In addition to this is an oversupply of unskilled workers and a shortage of professional and skilled workers, compounded by a lack of equipment and libraries in rural schools, overcrowded classrooms, overworked teachers, and inadequate funding. Therefore, rural learners face an uphill battle regarding access to adequate education, thus worsening levels of illiteracy and school dropout rates, as well as impacting employment opportunities, social status, household income, and dependency ratios (Kativhu et al., 2023).

3.4 Health services

The availability of and access to adequate health services is another challenge that the majority of rural communities have to contend with regularly. The scenario is complicated by the fact that rural communities are easily susceptible to illness and diseases. These have included Tuberculosis (TB) and HIV/AIDS, which thrive in poverty-stricken conditions of illiteracy and a lack of information about the disease years after 1994 (Meredith, 2011; Van Zyl et al., 2013). Although a large-scale AIDS pandemic might not have halted population growth, it worsens competition for resources at various levels within rural communities, which continue to face an uphill battle to survive, and could well devastate the welfare of the young through the removal of active adults from these communities; this is the reality that rural communities also face, particularly regarding child-headed families (Chambers, 1988). Making the situation worse is the centralisation of power in the hands of the wealthy, professionals, and urban class. These rural communities face a variety of challenges that define their struggle for survival because they perpetually depend on social grants, while the powerful and healthy continue on a successful trajectory (Bähre, 2011; Neves, 2017; Nwosu & Ndinda, 2018).

Given the weak and inadequate healthcare system in the underdeveloped rural areas, this further exacerbates the socio-economic conditions and livelihoods of rural communities, especially for those with chronic illnesses, who usually face the challenge of a shortage of medicinal supplies, their expense, and poor road infrastructure to access the said health facilities (DBSA, 2024). The sparsity of local health facilities does not help the situation, since the communities find themselves having to

travel long distances in order to access health services. The majority of clinics in rural areas also find themselves being targets of criminals, who either attack the security officials and disarm them, or even rape health officials, as occurred around Malumele and in Dzwerani village outside Thohoyandou in the Limpopo Province during 2020. The challenge of inadequate infrastructure is exacerbated by overworked doctors and health personnel as a result of overcrowding, long-distance travel, and high mortality rates (Stats SA, 2017). The dilapidated and washed-away roads and bridges pose a danger to the safety of rural communities and add to the problem of the distribution of goods, services, and medicinal supplies. This, in turn, affects access to healthcare, clinics, and employment opportunities and has become detrimental to the standard of living of rural communities (DBSA.org/benefits-social-infrastructure). Therefore, the challenge of health in rural communities continues to pose a hindrance to the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Hugo & Maloka, 2004; Meredith, 2011).

3.5 Water and sanitation

The problem of water provision in South Africa is a significant struggle, particularly for poor and marginalised communities. During the early days of democracy, the quality of water in the country was hailed as among the best to consume. However, as the years have dragged on, especially as we approach the thirty-year mark of celebrating the gains of our hard-fought democracy, the same cannot be said – especially for the rural poor, who depend entirely on the three tiers of government to fulfil the maxim of 'water is life'. Instead of water being synonymous with life, it has now become associated with mortality. According to Ashley and Carney (1999), poverty elimination is often a project that focuses on water supply to cater for food security and livelihoods. Unfortunately, while the government may be listening to the plight of struggling rural communities, the same cannot be said about involving them as partners or stakeholders in the process of finding solutions to water provision and supply. The less said about Black South African rural communities' struggle for access to clean, running, and potable water, the better. The general concern regarding the water crisis affects the poor in urban settlements as much as it affects rural communities. Nearly 50% of what communities regard as clean, potable, and consumable water in South Africa, accessed from taps, has been found to be unsuitable for human consumption (Sunday World Editorial, 2023). This underscores the undermining of the human dignity of struggling rural communities and highlights how far the democratic government has strayed from the essence of African values of Ubuntu and interdependence concerning the provision of basic services like water, thirty years down the line. Exacerbating the problem are the floods that wash away water infrastructure, while rural communities share water with animals (Scoones, 2009), further compromising their human dignity and African values. Unfortunately, the general responses from government officials and the Department of Water and Sanitation have been to blame the municipalities or the Department of Public Works, adopting a laissez-faire approach of non-interference in other spheres of government. This involves throwing money at the problem and walking away, particularly when municipalities encounter difficulties, thereby failing to fulfil their respective constitutional mandates (Sunday World Editorial, 2023). Furthermore, this points to a failure, or even ineffective partnership, in line with intergovernmental relations at national, provincial, and local government levels, as referred to by Kahn, Madue, and Kalema (2018).

3.6 Land and food security

There is no gainsaying that colonialism intentionally and strategically placed the rural areas, where the majority of Black South Africans historically settled, on a trajectory of underdevelopment and socio-economic injustice. This status quo was inherited by a similarly unjust and discriminatory apartheid government, which intensified the exploitation of Black South African rural communities by enacting various legislation for the separate development of the ten different cultural and language groups, with the Natives Land Act of 1913 being the most infamous (Oomen, 2005; Neluvhalani, 2018). Fast forward to the establishment of the self-governing homelands on the one hand and those granted

nominal independence on the other during the period of apartheid. The latter included the Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda, and Ciskei (TBVC), which, during their nominal independence, not only remained unrecognised internationally but also continued to wallow in underdevelopment, with their economies generally characterised by the struggles of rural life, especially during periods of incessant drought, which usually decimated their livestock (Mahosi, 2020; Heroldt & Dombro, 1992). This defined their trend of backwardness, as their economies were bound to be rural and largely dependent on agriculture, but their areas were generally located on infertile and rocky ground.

As part of the efforts to reverse the underdevelopment of the apartheid years, the democratic government of South Africa incorporated the policy of rural development into the agricultural arm of the government. In 2009, it restructured the agricultural department into the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD) at the national level and the Department of Agrarian Land Reform (DALR) at the provincial level (Kativhu et al., 2023). As a result, the democratic government inherited the homelands, which are still characterised by all the hallmarks of underdevelopment, socio-economic injustices and inequalities, abject poverty, marginalisation, and food insecurity (Mahosi, 2020). Although, after thirty years since the dawn of democracy, the South African government has introduced various initiatives to address land reform and development challenges in order to tackle food insecurity among rural communities—issues that exacerbate rural poverty—the struggle for land remains the elephant in the room regarding policy implementation (Ngcukaitobi, 2018 and 2021). This is despite the DALRRD going to the extent of introducing a "Rural Development and Land Strategic Plan, 2015-2020" as another effort to tackle hunger, malnutrition, and food insecurity, with attempts to alleviate rural community struggles, yet the results are still wanting (Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development, 2020).

3.7 Contestation between traditional leaders and elected officials

Chapter 12 of the Constitution of South Africa of 1996 discusses restoring the dignity of traditional leaders and advocating a partnership between traditional leaders and elected municipal officials (Constitution of South Africa, 1996; Municipal Structures Act 117, 1998). However, since the departure from the days of apartheid in 1994, the contestation and tension between traditional leaders and municipalities over rural administration remain a bone of contention (Mahosi, 2020; Maswanganyi, 2024). The concerning part is the wording of the legislation regarding the working relationship between traditional leaders, as custodians of culture and tradition, and elected officials. This ambiguity is caused by the fact that the legislative framework states that "it may provide for the role of traditional leaders at local levels." Having said this, an interpretation of the legislation clearly places traditional leaders at the lowest rung of administration (Traditional Leadership and Governance Frameworks Act of 2005). Such ambiguity and imperfections in legislation are a result of a policy lacuna, a lack of consensus on their role, and ambiguity regarding intergovernmental relations. This has placed traditional leaders in a precarious position and indirectly, if not directly, empowered elected officials to undermine the presence of traditional leaders in rural administration, hence the contestation.

The preceding statement is supported by the fact that after 1994, the public accused the government of not being serious about defining the role and status of traditional leaders within local administration (Tshamano & Mahosi, 2012). Traditionalism regards traditional leaders as custodians of rural welfare, while modernists mistakenly view them as belonging to the dustbin of history. This situation has pitted rural communities and their struggles at the centre of unwarranted contestation, which also hampers service delivery and worsens rural community struggles (Maswanganyi, 2024). The author is of the opinion that regardless of the noble policy documents that the government has attempted to produce, from the RDP (1994) to the NDP (2023) (Karriem & Hoskins, 2016), the commitment and political will on the part of the government to offer redress have been found wanting. Making matters worse has been the magnitude of corruption that has been allowed to creep in unchecked. Whatever noble ideas that have been touted and the loudest voices of criticism, the leadership in government has failed to

stem the tide in order to lead Black South Africans and the struggling rural communities to the 'Messianic' land of 'milk and honey'. Under the ANC, the last thirty years have been associated with cadre deployment, tenderpreneurship, and tender mafias, at the expense of turning the lives of rural people around for the better. The country's wastewater treatment plants are in shambles and pose serious health risks, while many roads remain unmaintained (StatsSA, 2017; Sunday World Editorial, 2023). All this speaks to the departure from the core values of placing Africans at the centre by serving South Africans with commitment and dedication.

4. Synopsis and Conclusion

The author discussed rural community struggles among Black South Africans thirty years since the dawn of democracy. In order to do this, the author employed the Afrocentric perspective, as it affords the voice of the excluded in discussions about themselves, a voice that has generally been absent in the past within Western discourse. Furthermore, the author identified pertinent issues facing rural communities in their struggle to exist and/or even lead a relatively stable life. These issues ranged from education to health and other forms of social security. The author considers this in light of the promise of 'a better life for all' made by the ruling ANC in 1994. Importantly, the author also examined a number of policy documents that were adopted to deliver this 'better life for all'. The promise of 'a better life for all' by the ruling party stemmed from the commitment to improve the lives of the formerly disadvantaged Black masses compared to the conditions under apartheid. Data from the sources showed that these policy documents included the RDP, the SDGs, the AU 2063, and the NDP 2030. In addition, the article provided a brief discussion of the essence of sustainable livelihoods among the man in the street, especially in rural communities that face many socio-economic challenges daily. The role of the DBSA in socio-economic development and its attempts to change lives also received attention.

However, it emerged from the discussion that while the governing party has improved lives in comparison to the apartheid era by delivering some basic services, 'a much better life for all' is yet to be realised. Rural communities still face a number of challenges, some of which have worsened since the dawn of democracy in 1994. The article discussed how the standard of education in rural communities has deteriorated, especially since learners in rural areas struggle to study in conducive and safe environments due to a number of problems they face. The lack of adequate infrastructure to support better educational conditions could not escape the author's attention, including hazardous infrastructure such as dangerous pit toilets, overcrowded classrooms, overworked teachers, and insufficient funding for education. Water and sanitation emerged as luxuries that are scarce, as did access to proper health facilities and accessible roads. The aforementioned issues, along with the lack of land and food security and the contestation for control of rural land between traditional leaders and municipalities, led the author to conclude that a better life has not been achieved thirty years since the dawn of democracy.

5. Declarations

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