International Journal of Applied Research in Business and Management (ISSN: 2700-8983)
Volume: 07 Issue: 10 Year: 2026
https://doi.org/10.51137/wrp.ijarbm.810

Urbanisation, Rural Development, and Socio-Spatial Change in Limpopo Former Homelands

Authors:

Malesela Jim Masenya (Malesela.masenya@ul.ac.za)
University of Limpopo, Limpopo, South Africa
ORCiD: 0009-0001-8945-2163

Abstract:

This study examines the evolving development trajectories within former homeland areas of Limpopo Province and their implications for conventional understandings of rurality and urbanisation in South Africa. Traditional development theories have long associated socio-economic advancement with migration from rural areas to metropolitan and economically developed urban centres. However, unfolding realities in Limpopo's former homelands suggest an alternative pattern in which local populations increasingly invest in and transform their own rural communities rather than permanently relocating to cities. Through infrastructural expansion, modern housing development, growth of local enterprises, changing consumption patterns, and improved access to social amenities, these areas are experiencing significant socio-spatial transformation. The study argues that these developments challenge the binary distinction between "rural" and "urban" spaces that has historically shaped development discourse and spatial analysis in South Africa. Former homeland areas in Limpopo are progressively acquiring characteristics commonly associated with urban environments while simultaneously retaining important rural social, cultural, and spatial identities. Consequently, these settlements occupy hybrid and ambiguous socio-spatial positions that complicate existing classifications used by researchers, planners, and policymakers. Drawing on perspectives from Development Studies and socio-spatial transformation theory, the article interrogates whether former homeland spaces should continue to be understood as rural peripheries or rather as emerging hybrid development spaces shaped by post-apartheid transformation, local agency, and evolving economic practices.

Keywords:

Urbanisation, Rural Development, Limpopo Province, Homelands

Submitted: 2026-05-25. Revised: 2026-06-14. Accepted: 2026-06-29.

WOHLLEBE & ROSS

Discover publication opportunities:
www.wr-publishing.org

International Journal of Applied Research in Business and Management (ISSN: 2700-8983)
Volume: 07 Issue: 10 Year: 2026
https://doi.org/10.51137/wrp.ijarbm.810

Introduction

The spatial legacy of apartheid continues to shape patterns of development and settlement in South Africa, particularly within former homeland regions that were historically designed as labour reserves and zones of socio-economic exclusion (Muchabveyo, Magaiza & Dube, 2025). Former homelands such as Lebowa, Venda, and Gazankulu in present-day Limpopo Province were deliberately structured to marginalise Black South Africans through underdevelopment, inadequate infrastructure, restricted economic opportunities, and dependence on migrant labour systems established under apartheid planning policies (Ntlhe, 2022). Historically, urbanisation in South Africa has largely been understood through the lens of rural-to-urban migration, where individuals relocate from rural communities to metropolitan centres in pursuit of employment opportunities, improved infrastructure, and better living conditions (Kajiita & Kang'ethe, 2024). Conventional development theories and planning approaches therefore continue to associate socio-economic progress with urban concentration and metropolitan growth while depicting rural areas as peripheral and underdeveloped spaces (Sikhosana & Mashalaba, 2026).

However, unfolding socio-spatial dynamics within Limpopo's former homeland areas increasingly challenge these traditional assumptions. Emerging development trends indicate that many residents are no longer solely dependent on permanent migration to urban centres but are increasingly investing in and transforming their own rural communities through infrastructural expansion, modern housing development, local entrepreneurship, digital connectivity, and changing consumption patterns (Ntlhe, 2022). Studies on spatial transformation in Limpopo reveal the emergence of peri-urbanisation, mixed land-use developments, and expanding settlement patterns that blur the distinction between rural and urban spaces (Mokoele, 2023). In many former homeland communities, urban lifestyles, commercial activities, and modern consumption practices coexist with communal land tenure systems, traditional leadership structures, and enduring rural identities (Sikhosana & Mashalaba, 2026). As a result, these settlements increasingly occupy hybrid socio-spatial positions that complicate binary classifications of "rural" and "urban" commonly used in Development Studies and spatial planning scholarship. The study seeks to investigate how localised development initiatives are reshaping historically marginalised rural spaces and to explore whether these settlements should continue to be understood as rural communities or rather as emerging hybrid socio-spatial formations. Furthermore, the article contributes to broader debates on post-apartheid spatial restructuring, rural transformation, and the rural–urban continuum in South Africa. The study argues that unfolding development trajectories in Limpopo's former homelands challenge migration-centred understandings of urbanisation by demonstrating how rural communities themselves are increasingly becoming sites of socio-economic transformation and spatial reconfiguration. Consequently, former homeland spaces no longer fit neatly into traditional rural or urban

WOHLLEBE & ROSS
Discover publication opportunities:
www.wr-publishing.org

International Journal of Applied Research in Business and Management (ISSN: 2700-8983)
Volume: 07 Issue: 10 Year: 2026
https://doi.org/10.51137/wrp.ijarbm.810

categories but instead represent evolving “rurban” formations shaped by local agency, infrastructural change, and post-apartheid development processes.

Historical Context of Former Homelands in South Africa

The historical evolution of former homeland regions in South Africa is deeply rooted in apartheid spatial planning, which institutionalised racial segregation and uneven development through the policy of “separate development.” Under apartheid, the South African state established Bantustans or homelands as territorially fragmented spaces designated for Black South Africans based on ethnic classifications, with the intention of excluding the Black majority from meaningful participation in urban economic and political life (Jensen & Zenker, 2015). The creation of homelands such as Lebowa, Gazankulu, and Venda in present-day Limpopo Province formed part of a broader strategy to confine African populations to peripheral rural territories while preserving economically productive urban and agricultural areas for white South Africans (Nyambi & Makombe, 2019). These homelands were characterised by overcrowding, weak infrastructure, limited industrial investment, poor service delivery, and restricted economic opportunities, conditions deliberately maintained to sustain the migrant labour system upon which apartheid capitalism depended (Ntlhe, 2022). In regions such as Lebowa, apartheid “betterment planning” further disrupted local livelihoods through forced removals, land dispossession, and restrictions on agricultural production, thereby intensifying rural poverty and dependency on wage labour in urban centres (Yawitch, 1982).

The homeland system in Limpopo fundamentally shaped migration patterns during and after apartheid. Due to the deliberate underdevelopment of Bantustan regions, many economically active individuals migrated to cities and mining centres such as Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Rustenburg in search of employment opportunities while maintaining social and familial ties with rural homes in Lebowa, Venda, and Gazankulu (Bakker, Parsons & Rauch, 2020). Under apartheid legislation, Black South Africans experienced severe restrictions on permanent urban settlement and were often treated as temporary migrants within urban areas despite their contribution to the national economy (Bakker et al., 2020). Consequently, former homelands functioned primarily as labour reservoirs supplying cheap labour to urban industries while remaining economically marginalised and spatially disconnected from mainstream development processes (Cox, 2010). Although the democratic transition in 1994 formally dismantled apartheid spatial controls, the socio-economic legacy of the homeland system continues to shape contemporary development patterns in Limpopo and other former Bantustan regions. Recent scholarship demonstrates that former homeland spaces remain marked by high unemployment, poverty, and infrastructural inequalities, yet they are simultaneously experiencing new forms of spatial transformation driven by local investment, remittances, small-scale entrepreneurship, and peri-urban expansion (Ntlhe, 2022; Livelihood Transitions Review, 2025). These evolving dynamics challenge earlier assumptions that development could only occur through permanent migration to metropolitan

International Journal of Applied Research in Business and Management (ISSN: 2700-8983)
Volume: 07 Issue: 10 Year: 2026
https://doi.org/10.51137/wrp.ijarbm.810

areas and instead reveal the emergence of increasingly complex and hybrid socio-spatial formations within former homeland regions.

Literature Review

Urbanisation and Migration Theories

Urbanisation has historically been understood within Development Studies as a process closely linked to industrialisation, economic modernisation, and the movement of populations from rural to urban areas. Classical urbanisation theories, particularly those influenced by modernisation theorists such as Rostow and Lewis, conceptualised development as a linear transition from traditional agrarian societies toward industrial and urban economies (Tacoli, 2017). Within this framework, cities are viewed as centres of economic growth, innovation, employment creation, and modern infrastructure, while rural areas are often portrayed as stagnant and underdeveloped spaces. Consequently, rural-to-urban migration became widely accepted as both a necessary and inevitable component of socio-economic development (Todaro, 1969). Migration theories further explain that individuals relocate to urban centres due to “push” factors such as poverty, unemployment, land scarcity, and limited services in rural areas, alongside “pull” factors including better employment opportunities, improved infrastructure, education, and access to healthcare in cities (De Haas, 2021). In the South African context, apartheid spatial planning reinforced these migration dynamics by structurally under-developing former homelands while concentrating economic opportunities within urban-industrial centres (Jensen & Zenker, 2015). As a result, rural regions such as Lebowa, Venda, and Gazankulu functioned primarily as labour reservoirs supplying migrant workers to metropolitan economies.

However, contemporary scholarship increasingly critiques the limitations of classical urbanisation models for oversimplifying the relationship between development and migration. Recent studies suggest that urbanisation processes in the Global South are becoming more complex and multidirectional, involving circular migration, multi-local livelihoods, and rural-based development initiatives rather than permanent relocation to cities (Potts, 2020). In South Africa, scholars argue that many former homeland communities are experiencing localised forms of socio-economic transformation driven by remittances, infrastructural investment, social grants, and small-scale entrepreneurship (Ntlhe, 2022). These developments challenge the assumption that development can only occur through metropolitan urbanisation and instead indicate that rural communities themselves are increasingly becoming sites of economic and spatial change. Consequently, conventional migration-centred theories struggle to adequately explain the emerging realities within former homeland spaces in Limpopo Province.

WOHLLEBE & ROSS

Discover publication opportunities:
www.wr-publishing.org

International Journal of Applied Research in Business and Management (ISSN: 2700-8983)
Volume: 07 Issue: 10 Year: 2026
https://doi.org/10.51137/wrp.ijarbm.810

Rural Development Perspectives

Rural development theories have evolved significantly from earlier modernisation approaches that viewed rural areas primarily as backward spaces requiring urban-led transformation. Contemporary rural development scholarship increasingly emphasises endogenous development, which focuses on local resources, local agency, and community-driven economic initiatives as central drivers of rural transformation (Ray, 2006). Endogenous development perspectives argue that sustainable development can emerge from within rural communities themselves through local entrepreneurship, social networks, indigenous knowledge systems, and decentralised economic activities rather than relying solely on external urban investment. In South Africa, this perspective has gained prominence within debates on local economic development (LED), particularly in historically marginalised former homeland areas where municipalities seek to stimulate economic activity through tourism, informal trade, infrastructure expansion, and small enterprise development (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021).

Furthermore, rural transformation theories argue that rural spaces are increasingly diversifying economically and socially due to globalisation, technological change, mobility, and changing consumption patterns (Woods, 2018). Rural livelihoods are no longer exclusively dependent on agriculture, as many households combine wage labour, social grants, remittances, informal business activities, and digital economic participation. In former homeland regions of Limpopo, local investments in modern housing, shopping centres, transport infrastructure, and communication technologies demonstrate how rural communities are increasingly integrated into broader economic and spatial networks (Mokoele, 2023). Nevertheless, despite these transformations, many development policies and academic frameworks continue to classify former homeland settlements as predominantly rural and underdeveloped. This reveals a significant conceptual gap in understanding the changing developmental character of these areas and the extent to which localised development processes are reshaping rurality in post-apartheid South Africa.

Socio-Spatial Change and Hybrid Spaces

The concept of socio-spatial change has become increasingly important in explaining the transformation of former homeland regions in South Africa. Socio-spatial theories emphasise that space is socially produced and continuously reshaped through economic, political, and cultural processes (Lefebvre, 1991). In post-apartheid South Africa, spatial restructuring has involved the gradual reconfiguration of settlement patterns, infrastructure networks, and economic activities beyond traditional urban centres (Harrison & Todes, 2017). Former homeland regions that were historically isolated and marginalised are increasingly experiencing peri-urbanisation, mixed land-use development, and expanding commercial activity, leading to more fluid and interconnected spatial forms. These developments challenge binary

WOHLLEBE & ROSS
Discover publication opportunities:
www.wr-publishing.org

distinctions between “urban” and “rural” spaces that have long dominated planning and development discourse.

Recent scholarship therefore increasingly adopts the concept of the rural–urban continuum to explain how many settlements simultaneously exhibit both rural and urban characteristics (Tacoli, 2003). Within this continuum, former homeland communities may retain communal land tenure systems, traditional leadership structures, and cultural rural identities while also displaying urban-like infrastructure, consumer behaviour, and economic diversification. This has given rise to the notion of “rurban” spaces or hybrid socio-spatial formations that blur conventional classifications of settlement and development (Sutherland et al., 2020). In Limpopo Province, settlements surrounding towns such as Mankweng, Thohoyandou, and Giyani increasingly reflect these hybrid characteristics through expanding housing developments, retail centres, digital connectivity, and transport integration. Post-apartheid spatial transformation has therefore created complex developmental landscapes in which former homeland areas can no longer be understood solely as rural peripheries. Despite growing scholarship on spatial restructuring, limited research specifically examines how these socio-spatial transformations in Limpopo’s former homelands challenge dominant urbanisation theories and conventional definitions of rurality and urbanity.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a combination of Socio-Spatial Transformation Theory, Rural–Urban Continuum Theory, and Post-Apartheid Spatial Restructuring perspectives to examine the changing developmental character of former homeland areas in Limpopo Province. These theoretical perspectives provide an appropriate conceptual lens for understanding how historically marginalised rural spaces are increasingly undergoing economic, infrastructural, and social transformation in ways that challenge conventional distinctions between rural and urban environments. The framework is particularly relevant in the South African context where apartheid spatial planning deliberately produced uneven geographies of development that continue to shape settlement patterns and socio-economic opportunities in former homeland regions (Harrison & Todes, 2017).

Socio-Spatial Transformation Theory provides an important foundation for analysing the relationship between space and social change. Drawing from Lefebvre’s (1991) conception of the social production of space, the theory argues that spatial environments are not fixed or naturally determined but are continuously shaped and reshaped through political, economic, cultural, and social processes. In former homeland areas of Limpopo, socio-spatial transformation is reflected through infrastructural expansion, modern housing developments, growth in commercial activities, improved connectivity, and changing livelihood patterns. These transformations indicate that rural spaces are increasingly becoming dynamic sites of socio-economic change rather than static zones of underdevelopment. Recent scholarship on

post-apartheid spatial change further demonstrates that settlement patterns in South Africa are becoming increasingly fluid, interconnected, and decentralised beyond traditional metropolitan centres (Mabin, 2022). Consequently, socio-spatial transformation theory enables this study to analyse how development processes are reconfiguring the social and spatial organisation of former homeland communities.

The Rural–Urban Continuum Theory further supports the study by challenging binary understandings of rurality and urbanity. Traditional development theories often conceptualise rural and urban areas as separate and opposing categories characterised by distinct economic activities, settlement forms, and social relations (Tacoli, 2003). However, contemporary scholarship increasingly argues that many communities simultaneously exhibit both rural and urban characteristics, creating hybrid socio-spatial formations that exist along a continuum rather than within rigid categories (Woods, 2018). In Limpopo's former homelands, communities continue to maintain communal land tenure systems, traditional leadership structures, and strong cultural identities associated with rurality, while simultaneously experiencing urban-like development through shopping complexes, transport networks, digital infrastructure, and diversified local economies. The concept of "rurban" spaces therefore becomes significant in explaining the hybrid developmental character of these settlements. This theoretical perspective assists the study in interrogating whether former homeland spaces should continue to be classified as rural or whether they represent emerging hybrid settlements shaped by ongoing socio-economic transformation.

The study also draws on Post-Apartheid Spatial Restructuring theory to situate these transformations within the broader historical and political context of South Africa's unequal spatial development. Apartheid planning systematically concentrated economic opportunities, industries, and infrastructure within white urban centres while relegating Black South Africans to impoverished and underdeveloped homeland regions (Jensen & Zenker, 2015). Although apartheid formally ended in 1994, the spatial inequalities created by the homeland system continue to influence contemporary development trajectories. However, recent post-apartheid development processes, including decentralised infrastructure investment, social welfare expansion, local economic development initiatives, and increased mobility, are gradually reshaping former homeland spaces (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021). This restructuring process has contributed to the emergence of new forms of local agency where communities increasingly participate in transforming their own environments through entrepreneurship, property development, and local investment. The concept of spatial inequality is therefore central to understanding both the historical marginalisation and the contemporary transformation of Limpopo's former homelands.

The integration of these theoretical perspectives allows the study to conceptualise former homeland regions not simply as rural peripheries but as evolving socio-spatial formations shaped by historical

International Journal of Applied Research in Business and Management (ISSN: 2700-8983)
Volume: 07 Issue: 10 Year: 2026
https://doi.org/10.51137/wrp.ijarbm.810

inequalities, local agency, and changing development trajectories. Key concepts such as rurality, urbanity, hybrid spaces, spatial inequality, and localised development are therefore critical in explaining how Limpopo's former homelands are increasingly blurring conventional distinctions between rural and urban spaces.

Research Methodology

A total of 24 participants were interviewed across the selected study sites. Participants included 5 municipal officials, 4 traditional leaders, 6 local business owners, 5 long-term community residents, and 4 youth professionals. Data collection was conducted between January and April 2025, during which semi-structured interviews and non-participant observations were undertaken across Mankweng, Thohoyandou, Giyani, and selected settlements within Makhado Municipality. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted in English, Sepedi, Tshivenda, and Xitsonga where appropriate. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee at University of Limpopo and traditional leader. Participants were provided with informed consent forms explaining the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any stage.

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore the evolving socio-spatial dynamics within former homeland areas in Limpopo Province. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study seeks to understand the meanings, experiences, perceptions, and developmental realities associated with changing rural and urban identities in historically marginalised communities. Qualitative research enables an in-depth examination of social processes, local agency, and spatial transformations within their natural settings, thereby providing rich contextual insights into complex development phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study further utilised elements of a mixed-method orientation through the incorporation of secondary quantitative data obtained from census reports, municipal statistics, and demographic records to support qualitative findings on settlement growth, infrastructural development, and population dynamics. The research employed a case study design focusing on selected former homeland regions within Limpopo Province, particularly areas historically associated with Lebowa, Venda, and Gazankulu. Specific localities included settlements surrounding Mankweng, Thohoyandou, Giyani, and parts of Makhado Municipality, which have experienced notable infrastructural expansion, commercial development, and socio-spatial transformation in recent years. The case study approach was suitable because it allows for an intensive and context-specific investigation of contemporary social phenomena within real-life settings (Yin, 2018). These study areas were purposively selected due to their historical significance as former homeland settlements and their emerging characteristics that increasingly blur distinctions between rural and urban spaces.

WOHLLEBE & ROSS

Discover publication opportunities:
www.wr-publishing.org

International Journal of Applied Research in Business and Management (ISSN: 2700-8983)
Volume: 07 Issue: 10 Year: 2026
https://doi.org/10.51137/wrp.ijarbm.810

Data for the study was collected through multiple qualitative and documentary sources to ensure triangulation and improve the credibility of the findings. Primary data were generated through semi-structured interviews conducted with community members, local business owners, municipal officials, traditional leaders, and youth residents within selected communities. Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to provide detailed insights into local development patterns, migration experiences, infrastructural changes, and perceptions of rural and urban identity. In addition, non-participant observations were conducted to capture visible socio-spatial transformations such as modern housing developments, commercial activities, transport infrastructure, retail centres, and changing settlement patterns within the study areas. Secondary data were obtained from municipal Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), Spatial Development Frameworks (SDFs), Statistics South Africa census reports, academic literature, and policy documents relating to rural development, urbanisation, and post-apartheid spatial transformation. These documentary sources provided important demographic, economic, and infrastructural information relevant to the study.

The study utilised purposive sampling to identify participants with relevant knowledge and experience regarding development processes within former homeland communities. Purposive sampling was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to select information-rich participants capable of providing detailed perspectives on socio-spatial transformation and local development dynamics (Etikan & Bala, 2017). Participants included municipal planners, traditional authorities, entrepreneurs, long-term residents, and young professionals residing within the selected areas. Snowball sampling was also employed in certain instances where participants assisted in identifying additional individuals with relevant knowledge of community transformation processes.

Data generated from interviews, observations, and documentary sources were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis allowed the researcher to systematically identify, interpret, and organise recurring themes and patterns emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis process involved coding interview transcripts, categorising key concepts, and identifying dominant themes related to urbanisation, rural transformation, infrastructural development, local agency, hybrid socio-spatial identities, and changing migration patterns. The use of thematic analysis was particularly useful in capturing the complexities and contradictions associated with the evolving developmental character of Limpopo's former homelands. Through this methodological approach, the study was able to critically examine how localised development processes are reshaping historically marginalised rural spaces and contributing to new forms of socio-spatial organisation in post-apartheid South Africa.

WOHLLEBE & ROSS

Discover publication opportunities:
www.wr-publishing.org

International Journal of Applied Research in Business and Management (ISSN: 2700-8983)
Volume: 07 Issue: 10 Year: 2026
https://doi.org/10.51137/wrp.ijarbm.810

Findings and Discussion

Infrastructure and Spatial Transformation

The findings reveal that former homeland areas in Limpopo Province are increasingly undergoing infrastructural and spatial transformation that resembles characteristics traditionally associated with urban environments. Across study areas such as Mankweng, Thohoyandou, Giyani, and sections of Makhado Municipality, participants highlighted significant improvements in road networks, electrification, housing development, internet connectivity, and commercial infrastructure over the past two decades. The expansion of tarred roads and public transport routes has enhanced mobility between former rural settlements and nearby towns, contributing to increased economic integration and spatial connectivity. Municipal infrastructure projects and private investments have also accelerated the construction of modern residential housing, shopping complexes, retail centres, and service stations within communities historically classified as rural settlements. These findings align with recent scholarship suggesting that post-apartheid infrastructural investment is increasingly transforming former homeland spaces into complex peri-urban environments (Harrison & Todes, 2017).

The expansion of digital infrastructure and telecommunications further demonstrates the changing spatial character of these communities. Improved access to mobile internet, fibre connectivity, and digital financial services has significantly altered communication patterns, business activities, and access to information within former homeland settlements. Participants noted that digital connectivity has enabled local entrepreneurship, online learning, remote work opportunities, and greater participation in broader economic networks. Electrification projects have similarly contributed to changing settlement patterns and living conditions by supporting modern household consumption and commercial activities. Although infrastructural inequalities remain evident in some areas, the findings suggest that former homelands increasingly display urban-like infrastructure and spatial forms that challenge traditional perceptions of these spaces as isolated and underdeveloped rural peripheries. Consequently, infrastructural transformation is reshaping both the physical landscape and socio-economic functionality of Limpopo's former homeland communities.

Local Economic Development and Entrepreneurship

The study further found that local economic development and entrepreneurship are becoming increasingly important drivers of transformation within former homeland regions. Participants reported substantial growth in both informal and formal business activities, including retail shops, transport services, construction enterprises, salons, internet cafés, food outlets, and accommodation facilities. Small enterprises owned by local residents have become significant sources of income generation and employment within communities historically characterised by economic dependency and labour

WOHLLEBE & ROSS
Discover publication opportunities:
www.wr-publishing.org

migration. In many instances, returning migrants and working professionals invest financial resources into local businesses, housing construction, and property development within their home communities rather than permanently relocating to metropolitan areas. This finding reflects broader shifts in livelihood strategies and investment patterns within post-apartheid rural South Africa (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021).

Remittance economies continue to play a significant role in local development processes within former homeland communities. Financial transfers from family members employed in urban centres are frequently invested in housing improvements, business ventures, education, and consumer goods within rural settlements. However, unlike earlier migration systems where rural areas primarily functioned as labour reserves dependent on urban economies, the findings indicate that many communities are increasingly developing internal economic activity and localised markets. Property development, particularly the construction of modern family homes and rental accommodation, has become a visible indicator of socio-economic mobility and local investment. These developments suggest that socio-economic transformation within former homelands is increasingly driven by local agency and community-based investment rather than solely by permanent migration to urban centres. Consequently, the findings challenge migration-centred development theories that continue to portray rural communities primarily as sites of economic stagnation and labour outmigration.

Changing Social and Consumption Patterns

The findings further demonstrate significant changes in social behaviour, lifestyle patterns, and consumption practices within former homeland communities. Participants described growing adoption of urban lifestyles characterised by modern housing aesthetics, increased consumer spending, digital technology usage, and changing social aspirations among younger generations. Shopping malls, supermarkets, fast-food outlets, and entertainment facilities established within or near former homeland settlements have altered local consumption patterns and reduced dependence on distant urban centres for goods and services. The growing availability of branded consumer products, private transportation, smartphones, and internet services reflects increasing integration into modern consumer economies. These developments illustrate how urban forms of consumption and social behaviour are increasingly being reproduced within historically rural communities.

Education and digital connectivity also emerged as important factors contributing to changing social identities and mobility within former homeland spaces. Improved access to higher education institutions, online learning platforms, and communication technologies has expanded opportunities for social advancement and exposure to urban lifestyles. Many younger residents maintain strong social and economic connections with both rural communities and urban centres, creating multi-local identities that transcend traditional rural–urban distinctions. Participants further noted that social mobility is

increasingly demonstrated through property ownership, entrepreneurial success, educational attainment, and consumption practices within rural communities themselves rather than solely through urban relocation. These findings support arguments within rural transformation literature that rural spaces are becoming socially and economically diversified due to technological change, mobility, and expanding consumer cultures (Woods, 2018). The reproduction of urban lifestyles within rural communities therefore complicates conventional understandings of rurality in post-apartheid South Africa.

Persistence of Rural Identities

Despite increasing socio-economic transformation and urban-like development, the findings indicate that strong rural identities and traditional social structures continue to shape everyday life within former homeland communities. Traditional leadership institutions remain influential in matters relating to land allocation, conflict resolution, cultural practices, and local governance. Participants frequently emphasised the importance of communal belonging, kinship networks, ancestral connections, and cultural identity within their communities. Communal land tenure systems continue to structure patterns of settlement and land ownership, distinguishing these areas from formally planned urban environments characterised by private property systems.

Agricultural practices, although reduced in economic significance for some households, continue to play an important cultural and subsistence role within many communities. Small-scale farming, livestock keeping, and household food production remain visible features of local livelihoods and spatial organisation. Participants also highlighted the continued importance of traditional ceremonies, indigenous languages, and customary practices in maintaining rural cultural identity despite increasing exposure to urban lifestyles and modern infrastructure. These findings demonstrate that socio-spatial transformation within former homeland areas does not necessarily imply the disappearance of rurality. Instead, rural identities continue to coexist alongside urban forms of development and consumption. This coexistence highlights the complexity of socio-spatial change within former homeland regions and suggests that urbanisation processes in Limpopo cannot be understood solely through conventional models of rural displacement or urban assimilation.

The Emergence of Hybrid Socio-Spatial Spaces

The findings of the study ultimately reveal the emergence of hybrid socio-spatial formations that cannot be fully classified as either rural or urban. Former homeland communities increasingly exhibit characteristics associated with both categories simultaneously. On the one hand, these areas display urban-like infrastructure, expanding commercial activity, digital connectivity, diversified livelihoods, and modern consumption patterns. On the other hand, they continue to retain communal land systems, traditional governance structures, cultural rural identities, and aspects of agrarian livelihood practices.

International Journal of Applied Research in Business and Management (ISSN: 2700-8983)
Volume: 07 Issue: 10 Year: 2026
https://doi.org/10.51137/wrp.ijarbm.810

These overlapping characteristics position former homeland settlements along a rural–urban continuum rather than within rigid spatial categories.

The concept of "rurban" spaces therefore provides a useful framework for understanding the evolving developmental character of Limpopo's former homelands. The findings suggest that these communities represent hybrid socio-spatial formations shaped by post-apartheid infrastructural investment, local entrepreneurship, mobility, and enduring cultural attachments. This transformation challenges conventional planning and development frameworks that continue to classify settlements according to rigid rural–urban binaries. Municipal planning systems, service delivery frameworks, and spatial policies often fail to adequately respond to the complex realities of hybrid settlements that simultaneously require urban infrastructure investment and recognition of rural social systems. Consequently, the findings highlight the need for more flexible and context-sensitive approaches to development planning within former homeland regions.

Infrastructure and Spatial Transformation

One participant from Mankweng observed: "Twenty years ago, most roads here were gravel, but now we have tarred roads, shopping centres and better transport. People no longer travel to Polokwane for every service." (Community Resident, Mankweng) Field observations further revealed extensive residential developments characterised by modern brick housing, perimeter walls, and improved road access, reflecting significant physical transformation within former homeland settlements.

Local Economic Development and Entrepreneurship

A local entrepreneur from Giyani explained: "Instead of moving permanently to Johannesburg, many people are investing here at home. We open businesses because there is now a market and people have money to spend locally." Similarly, a municipal official noted: "We have seen increased demand for business sites and commercial development in areas that were previously regarded as purely rural."

Changing Social and Consumption Patterns

A youth participant from Thohoyandou stated: "We can study online, buy things online and work remotely. We still live here, but our lifestyle is not very different from people living in towns." Observations also indicated widespread smartphone usage, internet-based businesses, and increased patronage of retail centres located within former homeland communities.

Persistence of Rural Identities

Despite these transformations, traditional institutions remain influential. As one traditional leader explained: "Development has changed many things, but people still come to traditional authorities for

WOHLLEBE & ROSS

Discover publication opportunities:
www.wr-publishing.org

International Journal of Applied Research in Business and Management (ISSN: 2700-8983)
Volume: 07 Issue: 10 Year: 2026
https://doi.org/10.51137/wrp.ijarbm.810

land allocation and cultural matters." Another participant remarked: "Even if we build modern houses, we still identify strongly with our traditions and community."

Emergence of Hybrid Spaces

The hybrid nature of these settlements was captured by one participant who stated: "We are no longer completely rural, but we are not fully urban either. We have characteristics of both." This perspective reflects the broader theme emerging across interviews that former homeland communities increasingly occupy a socio-spatial position between conventional rural and urban categories.

Implications for Development Studies and Policy

The findings of this study carry significant implications for Development Studies, spatial planning, and public policy in South Africa. Firstly, the study demonstrates the limitations of traditional rural–urban classifications that continue to dominate development discourse and planning frameworks. Former homeland settlements in Limpopo increasingly exhibit hybrid characteristics that cannot be adequately understood through binary distinctions between rurality and urbanity. The persistence of these rigid classifications' risks overlooking the complex socio-economic realities and developmental needs of communities undergoing rapid transformation. Development frameworks must therefore move beyond conventional migration-centred understandings of urbanisation and recognise the growing importance of localised development processes occurring within historically marginalised rural regions.

Secondly, the findings highlight the need for revised development policies and planning approaches capable of addressing the emergence of hybrid socio-spatial formations. Municipal planning systems should incorporate the realities of "rurban" settlements by integrating infrastructure provision, economic development strategies, housing planning, digital connectivity, and land governance within broader spatial development frameworks. Infrastructure policies should further recognise that former homeland communities are becoming increasingly economically active and spatially integrated rather than remaining isolated rural peripheries. Greater investment in transport networks, internet infrastructure, local enterprise development, and public services is therefore necessary to support sustainable socio-economic transformation within these areas.

Finally, the study contributes to broader debates on spatial justice and post-apartheid development in South Africa. The transformation of former homeland spaces demonstrates that historically marginalised communities are increasingly exercising local agency in reshaping their developmental trajectories despite enduring structural inequalities. However, persistent disparities in infrastructure quality, employment opportunities, and access to services continue to reflect the long-term effects of apartheid spatial planning. Addressing these inequalities requires development policies that not only promote

WOHLLEBE & ROSS
Discover publication opportunities:
www.wr-publishing.org

economic growth but also confront the historical spatial injustices embedded within South Africa's settlement landscape.

Conclusion

While this study demonstrates the emergence of hybrid socio-spatial formations within Limpopo's former homelands, several questions remain unresolved and warrant further investigation. Future research should examine the long-term sustainability of local economic development initiatives, the implications of changing land-use patterns for traditional governance systems, and the experiences of younger generations navigating increasingly fluid rural–urban identities. Comparative studies across former homeland regions in other provinces could further assess whether similar "rurban" development trajectories are emerging elsewhere in South Africa. Methodologically, future research may benefit from longitudinal designs and mixed method approaches that combine qualitative insights with spatial, demographic, and economic data to better understand the evolving character of post-apartheid settlement transformation. Such studies would deepen theoretical debates on rural transformation, urbanisation, and socio-spatial change while providing valuable evidence for development planning and policy formulation.

References

Bakker, J., Parsons, R., & Rauch, T. (2020). Migration and urbanisation in post-apartheid South Africa. Journal of Southern African Studies, 46(5):923–940.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide. London: Sage Publications.

Cox, K. R. (2010). South Africa's spatial legacy and the challenge of transformation. Geographical Review, 100(1):1–16.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

De Haas, H. (2021). A theory of migration: the aspirations-capabilities framework. Comparative Migration Studies, 9(8):1–35.

Etikan, I., & Bala, K. (2017). Sampling and sampling methods. Biometrics & Biostatistics International Journal, 5(6):215–217.

Harrison, P., & Todes, A. (2017). Spatial transformations in a "loosening state": South Africa in a comparative perspective. Geoforum, 85:259–267.

Jensen, S., & Zenker, O. (2015). Homelands and the political geography of apartheid South Africa. Journal of Southern African Studies, 41(1):7–24.

Kajiita, R. M., & Kang'ethe, S. M. (2024). Urbanisation and socio-economic transformation in Sub-Saharan Africa. African Journal of Development Studies, 14(2):55–72.

Lefebvre, H. (1991). The Production of Space. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Mabin, A. (2022). Urbanisation and spatial change in post-apartheid South Africa. Urban Forum, 33(4):511–528.

Mokoele, M. P. (2023). Peri-urbanisation and spatial restructuring in Limpopo Province. South African Geographical Journal, 105(2):198–214.

Muchabveyo, T., Magaiza, G., & Dube, E. (2025). Rural transformation and development trajectories in South Africa's former homelands. Development Southern Africa, 42(4–5):609–629.

Ntlhe, K. G. (2022). The transformation of compact rural human settlements in South Africa: The case of Elim in Limpopo. Journal of Rural Studies, 91:150–162.

Potts, D. (2020). Debates about African urbanisation, migration and economic growth. Urban Studies, 57(3):498–519.

Ray, C. (2006). Neo-endogenous rural development in the EU. In P. Cloke, T. Marsden & P. Mooney (Eds.), Handbook of Rural Studies (pp. 278–291). London: Sage Publications.

Rogerson, C. M., & Rogerson, J. M. (2021). Local economic development in South Africa: Progress and challenges. Local Economy, 36(1):3–15.

Sikhosana, M., & Mashalaba, T. (2026). Rurality, urbanisation and spatial inequality in post-apartheid South Africa. African Human Mobility Review, 12(1):44–63.

Sutherland, C., Sim, V., Scott, D., & Robbins, G. (2020). The "rurban" interface: New conceptualisations of settlement and development in South Africa. Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa, 102:1–22.

Tacoli, C. (2003). The links between urban and rural development. Environment and Urbanization, 15(1):3–12.

Tacoli, C. (2017). Urbanisation, rural transformation and development. International Institute for Environment and Development Working Paper, London.

Todaro, M. P. (1969). A model of labour migration and urban unemployment in less developed countries. American Economic Review, 59(1):138–148.

Woods, M. (2018). Rural. London: Routledge.

Yawitch, J. (1982). Betterment Planning in South Africa: Its history and implementation. African Studies Review, 25(1):85–98.

International Journal of Applied Research in Business and Management (ISSN: 2700-8983)
Volume: 07 Issue: 10 Year: 2026
https://doi.org/10.51137/wrp.ijarbm.810

Yin, R. K. (2018). Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

WOHLLEBE & ROSS

Discover publication opportunities:
www.wr-publishing.org