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The Politics of Translocality

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Across Southern Africa, household members routinely migrate for work, education and services while maintaining economic, social, and political ties to their rural homes. Drawing on a survey in seven Southern African countries, we show that climate change has become an additional driver reinforcing translocality, with far-reaching governance implications. As rural households' reliance on wage income grows, economic power shifts to urban-based household members, drawing them into rural politics and reshaping participation, accountability, and resource management. This leads to a mismatch between local authorities'[1] mandates and capacities. Governments in Southern Africa as well as international partners must reform local governance and decentralization policies accordingly, linking the urban and the rural.

Subsistence livelihoods in rural Africa have long been under strain, from planned resource extraction and exclusion from public services under colonial regimes to ongoing marginalization as governments prioritize service delivery to rapidly growing urban populations. For decades, households in Southern Africa have responded to vulnerability by diversifying – by supplementing subsistence activities through translocal arrangements. For example, one or more family member may move to a town or city, combining wage labour with access to services, while rural households continue to provide food, care, property management and social security.[2] These translocal arrangements represent a rational strategy for balancing risk across locations and livelihoods.[3]

Earlier research expected that increasing urbanization would reduce the significance of such translocal strategies,[4] but evidence now points in the opposite direction. The household survey underpinning this policy brief suggests that climate change has become a major additional driver of translocality. Southern Africa is among the regions most impacted by climate change. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the region is a climate change "hotspot", showing rates of warming in recent dec-

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[1] Instead of using the term local governments, we refer to "local authorities" as in many of the surveyed countries not only local councils but also customary authorities play an important role in local governance. Depending on the context, some of the customary leaders might even be government officials. For the complex history and blurred lines between state and customary authorities see J. Michael Williams, "Customary Law and Chieftainship in Southern Africa", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, 2024.

[2] John Narh and Stefanie Wehner, "Translocal Reciprocity: Unpacking Translocal Livelihood in Parts of Ghana", *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 12, no. 1 (2025): 1-14.

[3] Clemens Greiner, "Can Households be Multilocal? Conceptual and Considerations Based on a Namibian Case Study", *DIE ERDE–Journal of the Geographical Society of Berlin*, 143, no. 3 (2012): 195-212.

[4] Peter Geschiere, "The Funeral in the Village: Urbanites' Shifting Imaginations of Belonging, Mobility, and Community," in *The Arts of Citizenship in African Cities: Infrastructures and Spaces of Belonging*, ed. Mamadou Diouf and Rosalind Frederick (Springer, 2014), 49-66.

ades about twice the global average.[5] In 2024, 68 million people in the South African Development Community were in need of aid due to extreme drought, amounting to 17 per cent of the region's population.[6] Changing rainfall patterns, droughts, and extreme weather events impact subsistence agriculture and communal resource use in particular because these are rain-fed.[7] As rural households become more dependent on cash to meet basic needs and protect assets, they increasingly rely on wage income and support from urban-based family members.[8] This deepens economic interdependence across locations and shifts control over household resources toward those who no longer reside in rural communities.

We argue that this reconfiguration of economic power has happened in parallel with a reshaping of political engagement, which has allowed for a reassertion of rural power with important implications for local governance.[9] Urban-based household members often retain strong attachments to their home villages and become actively involved in decisions about land, infrastructure, cultural reproduction, and communal resources. With urban migrants often being politically marginalized in the cities to which they moved, rural linkages become a key pathway to access citizen rights and services.[10] As a result, just as urban economic power is becoming more important for households, so is rural political power. However, these dynamics are rarely reflected in mechanisms for local public participation, which are bound to the specific location in which they are held. Equally, decentralization policies, including tax allocation, do not account for translocal populations.

One reason is the difficulty of quantifying translocal households. Many governments do not systematically track rural to urban mobility, and migrants do not always register in their new locations, even though this mobility is frequently permanent rather than seasonal or circular.

Recent research suggests that an astonishing 50 per cent of all households in Sub-Saharan Africa, more than half a billion people, currently live in translocally organized households, whether it is as "movers" or "stayers".[11] A recent study of residents in seven small Ugandan towns found that more than 75 per cent of all residents maintained linkages with rural areas, with over half maintaining direct access to land.[12] Research from Namibia suggests that about 80 per cent of households in rural areas receive remittances, indicating that this is a regional trend, rather than an isolated example.[13] This is reinforced by data

[5] Francois A. Engelbrecht and Pedro M. S. Monteiro, "The IPCC Assessment Report Six Working Group 1 Report and Southern Africa: Reasons to Take Action." *South African Journal of Science* 117, no. 11/12 (2021):1-7.

[6] Nyasha Chingono, "Nearly 68 million Suffering from Drought in Southern Africa, Says Regional Bloc", *Reuters*, 17 August 2024, accessed 18 February 2026.

[7] Farirai Rusere, Cyrus Samimi, Siyabusa Mkuhlani, Lori Hunter and Wayne Twine, "Livelihood Transitions and Determinants in Rural South Africa: Insights from a Longitudinal Analysis of Households in Bushbuckridge, Mpumalanga Province", *Society & Natural Resources* (2025):1-26; Gift Andrew Sabola, "Climate Change Impacts on Agricultural Trade and Food Security in Emerging Economies: Case of Southern Africa." *Discover Agriculture* 2, no. 12 (2024): 1-8.

[8] Luise Porst and Patrick Sakdapolrak, "Advancing Adaptation or Producing Precarity? The Role of Rural-Urban Migration and Translocal Embeddedness in Navigating Household Resilience in Thailand", Geoforum 97 (2018): 35-45.

[9] Peter Geschiere, "The Funeral in the Village: Urbanites' Shifting Imaginations of Belonging, Mobility, and Community," in *The Arts of Citizenship in African Cities: Infrastructures and Spaces of Belonging*, ed. Mamadou Diouf and Rosalind Frederick (Springer, 2014), 49-66.

[10] Cecilia Tacoli, Gordon McGranahan, and David Satterthwaite, *Urbanisation, Rural-Urban Migration and Urban Poverty*, IEED Working Paper (Human Settlements Group, International Institute for Environment and Development, 2015).

[11] Malte Steinbrink and Hannah Niedenführ. *Africa on the Move: Migration, Translocal Livelihoods and Rural Development in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Springer International Publishing, 2019), 85-134.

[12] Agnes Andersson, Heather Mackay and Paul Isolo Mukwaya, "Translocal Livelihoods, Socio-Economic Differentiation and Lower Level Urbanisation in Uganda." *Journal of International Development* 37, no. 2 (2025): 607-619.

[13] Greiner, "Can households be multilocal?", 195-212.

from the survey considered here, in which more than half of all households use migration as a strategy to address climate stressors in rural areas.

Despite limited visibility in official statistics, the socio-economic and political consequences of translocality are profound. Our research shows that while translocal livelihoods strengthen households' capacity to adapt to climate stress, they also fall outside formal systems of participation, planning, and service delivery. Local authorities are expected to govern communities whose key resource holders and decision-makers are often absent. This produces a governance landscape in which authority, accountability, services, and capital no longer align geographically but are negotiated across interconnected rural and urban spaces. Existing decentralization frameworks, which assume that people live, invest, and participate politically in the same place, struggle to accommodate this reality.

In the sections that follow, we examine the drivers of translocal livelihoods and assess their socio-economic and political implications. The analysis draws on a mixed-methods household survey conducted in 12 rural and peri-urban localities across Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The survey explored ecological, economic, social, and political impacts of climate change, including changes in subsistence activities, communal resource management, and engagement with local authorities. It was conducted between 2019 and 2023 and administered in seven languages to over 1,000 respondents and complemented by 135 key informant interviews. For this policy brief, we draw on illustrative qualitative cases where translocality most clearly reshapes local governance. Together, these findings show why recognizing and institutionalizing translocal governance is no longer optional but essential for effective, legitimate, and climate-resilient local governance.

Drivers of Translocality

In Southern Africa, translocal livelihoods have their roots in the colonial and apartheid era, when male workers from neighbouring countries and the South African countryside migrated to work in South African mines. Migration was circular in these cases, as workers were forced to return home in between contracts, and temporary housing was provided, so no investment was expected in mining communities. After the apartheid era, translocal livelihoods shifted more to longer-term forms of migration with emerging wage labour opportunities in cities, but sometimes maintaining an expectation that workers would retire in their rural areas of origin.[14]

Apart from economic transformation and urbanization, the seasonal and weather-dependent nature of agriculture has also been a primary driver of translocal living arrangements. Translocality serves in most instances as an economic and risk diversification strategy. Family members who migrate to cities contribute remittances, while rural households often contribute in terms of in-kind contributions, for instance dairy, meat, or other agricultural products. They might also offer care-economy support, such as child fostering and caring for sick, disabled, or ageing relatives. As such, the rural household serves as a form of social security. Besides, rural households take care of the family property and look after livestock. In return, urban households might help extended family members with accessing services that are not available in the countryside, such as secondary or higher education for

[14] Marie Wentzel and Kholadi Tlabela, "Historical Background to South African Migration." In *Migration in South and Southern Africa: Dynamics and Determinants,* ed. Pieter Kok, Derik Gelderblom, John O. Oucho, and Johan van Zyl (HSRC Press, 2006), 71-95.

young people.[15] While there has been considerable research on the effect of translocality on household livelihoods, this reconfiguration also has important political consequences.

Cultural reproduction is another strong driver of translocality. Translocal exchange relations are based on social and kinship ties, and occasions like weddings and funerals are used to reinforce these ties and undergird a joint identity. Hence, the moral obligation to support one's networks fosters reciprocity. In addition, cultural reproduction can be highly political, in the sense that urban elites may sustain community loyalties to mobilize followers for accessing state power and resources – for instance, through ethnic associations. The introduction of multi-party politics in the 1990s encouraged this dynamic. As incumbent regimes feared the competition of opposition parties, in many cases ethnic and elite associations were promoted to step in as intermediaries to secure followership.[16] Despite this, the political implications of translocality for local governance, in particular, have been nearly absent from discussion.

While the above-mentioned drivers are still relevant, our survey results indicate that in respondents' perception, climate change has recently put additional economic stress on households. Extreme weather events, changing rainfall patterns, and droughts have made households' subsistence farming activities less economically viable. Seventy-eight per cent of survey responders indicated that they needed cash to buy staple crops, while ten to fifteen years ago they could satisfy their household needs through subsistence. Hence, climate change has limited the possibility of selling additional agricultural products, and requires the purchase of food products which, in the past, could be reliably grown. This means that rural households rely more than before on translocal livelihoods as an economic diversification strategy. The increasing importance of cash to manage rural assets has shifted reliance on to urban household members, who are more likely to own and manage the assets of (rural) households where they are not resident.

Another driver of translocality that came out strongly in the survey and has not been prominently discussed by previous academic work, is the nature of urbanization. Even though cities provide, on average, better services for its residents than rural authorities, these are not necessarily accessible without political connections. This is particularly true in political contexts that may be exclusionary in urban and peri-urban areas, and while resources in rural areas may not be sufficient, the negotiation around their allocation is more predictable. This dynamic reinforces urban residents' investment in rural areas, which they consider a more efficient and reliable option.

Socio-economic Consequences of Translocality

Translocality reshapes how households manage risk, resources, and investment across rural and urban areas. Over 50 per cent of the survey respondents in both rural and peri-urban areas planned on some form of translocality as their primary strategy to adapt to climate shocks and stressors, whether it was to migrate themselves for wage labour, or to use remitted support for infrastructure development. While translocality strengthens households' ability to cope with climate shocks and plan for the future, it also shifts economic power away from those physically present in rural communities toward absent urban-based asset holders. Respondents in peri-urban areas were 68 per cent more likely

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[15] Greiner, "Can households be multilocal?", 195-212.
[16] Peter Geschiere and Josef Gugler. "Introduction: The Urban–Rural Connection: Changing Issues of Belonging and Identification." *Africa* 68, no. 3 (1998): 309-19.

than those in rural areas to be able to outline concrete steps they were taking to respond to climate shocks and stressors, a difference that was attributed by most respondents to the availability of resources to facilitate planning.

People in rural areas were 18 per cent more likely to be able to identify organisations they could approach for help in the event of a climate shock or stressor, but also 38 per cent less likely to anticipate receiving the help they required than those in peri-urban areas, possibly highlighting the extent to which the availability of services in peri-urban areas does not equate to access. Additionally, women were significantly more likely than men to turn to individuals, instead of institutions, for support. This points simultaneously to the prevalence of support networks in rural areas, but a comparative inability of rural authorities to respond to the needs of citizens. While rural areas retain strong social networks, local authorities often lack capacity to respond to changing needs and rural households have fewer resources at their disposal.

At the same time, urban residents, who frequently face exclusion from effective participation in cities, continue to invest economically and politically in their home villages, reinforcing rural areas as key sites for long-term security and influence. Urbanites' ability to influence decision-making may make rural areas seem like "safer" long term investments, particularly when peri-urban areas suffer from insecurity in land tenure, safety, or other uncertainties that deter longer term investment. While urban migrants are relatively well off when compared to their rural peers, in urban areas they often belong to the less privileged city dwellers. Their status and political connections in the rural area make long-term investments in their home town a more reliable and efficient choice. The result is a livelihood system that is more adaptive at the household level, but increasingly misaligned with place-based governance and service delivery systems.

> **Box 1: Services Must be Both Available, and Accessible**
> A woman in Ottoshoop, South Africa, held an administrative position for the local clinic. The town as a whole had been in the news for corruption and mismanagement for many years. With a formal job, she felt she should no longer be renting a house, and instead be investing in a home where she could retire. While the town was a better financial investment, she was concerned with the ongoing corruption, and its implications on services. The village she came from was about 100 km away, and did not have access to many services. However, she felt that the local leadership was sympathetic, and if she needed help, they would be supportive. She had recently had problems with the billing of her utilities, and the local authorities had used it as an opportunity to extort money from her. On the other hand, her mother, who was retired in the village she came from, had received help from the local authorities to qualify for free services as a pensioner. She also saw that, while the village did not have tap water running to people's houses, when they installed a new water source, her mother was able to advocate for the placement of the borehole. She felt this ability to influence her own situation in the village was preferable to a more developed town, where she might be vulnerable to people in positions of political power who did not have her interests at heart.

Political Consequences of Translocality

When Southern African countries decentralized, this was done with an assumption that there was a spatial alignment between where people lived, where their resources came from, and where they accessed services. However, this does not reflect current translocal realities, meaning that there is a mismatch between the way in which people are planning their livelihoods, and the way in which local authorities work.

Local authorities point to a shift that the absence of resource owners has created in their roles and responsibilities. Local officials find it increasingly difficult to enforce decisions, as resource owners in rural areas are commonly urban migrants. Namibia, for instance, has been a regional leader in community-based natural resource management. This means local authorities play an important facilitating role in mediating stakeholder interests, promoting buy-in, and educating residents about the environmental implications of sustainable natural resource use. Fisheries are communally managed, with local authorities obtaining buy-in about sustainable fishing practices, such as fixed net sizes and closed fishing seasons. Yet, many people with sufficient support migrate from villages to Rundu (Namibia) for wider employment opportunities. There has been an increasing trend for those people who have secured employment to invest in fishing vessels back home, raising concerns among local authorities that this has led to less sustainable fishing, and a depletion of fishing stock, and that it is more difficult to issue permits to regulate fishing with boat-owners not living locally:

> We sensitize the community about fishing restrictions, but some people are under instructions to act differently, then we have to become police. But we are not equipped for that. We don't have the resources, but also, that is not what our role should be in the community. When a family is hungry, and they are fishing in the closed season to eat, we are not going to arrest them. We are going to work together. But when it is a big trawler, we don't see a way of working together.

In addition, local authorities' allocation and management function for communally managed resources, such as grass for thatching (see Box 2) loses significance. This is because climate change makes natural resource-use less predictable, as do translocal living arrangements, which lead to lower availability of community members for collective, labour-intensive activities. Private economic capital, which often comes from urban ties, has become increasingly more important than community action in natural resource management and distribution of, for example, fencing, veterinary supplies, or water pumps. With capital from urban areas playing a more important role in rural economies, services that support the distribution of private capital have also become important, such as transportation, or communication infrastructure. Local authorities may play a minor role in these (such as being responsible for the infrastructure of bus stops or traffic safety).

Another critical resource in both rural and urban areas are public services, which local authorities may have some power to allocate, but often do not directly provide. Translocal households are often balancing different constraints to public services, and local authorities must also understand citizens' perspectives. For example, many rural areas in Southern Africa are facing significant backlogs in provision of certain public services, with school attendance requiring walks sometimes hours long, or teachers being unavailable. In more urban areas schools are available, but may be inaccessible to marginalized migrants, with places for children being allocated based on residence in a more expensive area, or com-

manding exclusionary school fees. While translocal households can keep both options open based on the needs of the learners at different times, it means it can be difficult for authorities to plan and engage around provision that might happen in different geographies.

> **Box 2: Decision Making about Rural Capital**
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> Grass for thatching used to be a valuable local asset, which was prized for its role as roofing material throughout the region. An important role local traditional authorities played was allocating the rights to harvest thatching grass in different areas. However, climate change has shifted rainfall patterns recently, with more frequent heavy downpours at unseasonal times. This has made it more difficult to harvest and dry roofing grass reliably. Furthermore, with increased labour migration to urban areas, it is more difficult to gather the community to rethatch roofs. As a result, many people are shifting to tin roofs, and the distribution policies of thatch harvesting no longer carry significant weight. Instead, there is an increased need to negotiate with people who have migrated to urban areas over affordable transport of construction material, because this has become the primary expense of roofing. This shifts the governing power from local authorities to urban migrants.

There are also inconsistencies regarding political decision-making at different levels of government. In Xhumaga (Botswana), which borders a protected area that had damaged fencing, citizens demanded of local authorities that the fence be fixed. Yet, fencing is part of the national governments' mandate. Local authorities had to rely on people who had family members living in Gaborone to advocate to the national department. There was an understanding that, despite goodwill from all parties, backlogs were part of many services, and there was a need to advocate for provision on more than one front. Having people from the village migrate to the capital means they can be called on to advocate for the community's interests in cases where decision-making takes place in the city. This dynamic adds to the decreasing political significance of local authorities.

The absence of resource owners not only creates enforcement challenges, but also calls into question the logic of local participation. Participatory processes with those living in the community become meaningless, as decisions taken in these fora do not have the buy-in of absent resource owners. All survey sites showed a high level of commitment to participation, on behalf both of local authorities and citizens. Yet, the trust established in these fora cannot be sustained when citizens are under instructions from urban resource owners to act differently, as the example of fishing regulation shows. Overall, citizens are disincentivized to take part in participatory processes when these processes do not acknowledge the shifts brought on by translocality.

At the same time, translocality disincentivizes urban migrants from participating and investing in urban areas. Afrobarometer survey data (2021–2023)[17] across the seven countries clearly shows that people in rural areas tend to participate more than people in urban areas. While in rural areas 41 per cent of respondents indicated that they had attended community meetings often or several times in the past year, for urban areas that was only for 23 per cent (peri-urban: 28%). In addition, rural inhabitants trust their local government

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[17] Afrobarometer Data, Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Round 9, 2021/2023, available at http://www.afrobarometer.org.

council a lot more than urbanites do: only 13 per cent of urbanites indicated trust in their local government council as opposed to 23 per cent of rural inhabitants. A smaller proportion of urbanites had voted in the last national election (63% in the surveyed countries) than had their rural counterparts (70%). This pattern of political participation highlights urban disenfranchisement and the relative attraction of political participation in rural areas.

Current research on participation assumes that participation is completely geographically bounded. Local authorities are set up to facilitate participation locally, because there is an assumption of a geographic link between where people live, where they control resources, and where they would want to participate politically. However, this is not the case. Ignoring the reality of translocal livelihoods makes it increasingly difficult to make participation meaningful.

In addition, the investments urbanites are making in their home area not only have implications for managing current resource use, but oftentimes also include decisions that have implications for future infrastructure planning. In the survey, several examples showed how urban migrants had returned to their hometown not only to build houses for themselves, but also to contribute to shaping the surrounding infrastructure. These decisions can be difficult to include in official development plans if residents are not present in the participatory planning processes.

With urban workers planning to bring capital back to rural areas upon retirement, or investing in a planned way remotely during their career, it is clear that longer term development planning interventions need to consider not only local residents but also nonresidents who are concretely contributing resources that affect developing planning. This may require fostering new structures for democratic engagement, as well as new forms of communication and accountability.

Conclusion

Translocality is not a new phenomenon. However, while research from the 1960s expected that with increasing urbanization it would lose its significance, our research shows that urbanization and climate change are rather jointly fostering translocality. At first sight, it seems as if rural areas were on the losing end, as subsistence activities and communally managed resources have been losing significance, and rural assets are increasingly being managed from the city. Yet, many urban residents who migrated in search of better public services encounter a paradox: services are more available in cities, but not necessarily more accessible, as barriers of cost, bureaucracy, and political exclusion persist. This gap reinforces the continued importance of rural connections as a pathway for citizens to secure support, legitimacy, and belonging. They anchor long-term economic planning for most households, provide more predictable avenues for consultation, and remain spaces where citizens can meaningfully influence decisions that affect their lives.

Hence, our research shows that the shift of economic power towards cities does not mean that rural areas become politically meaningless. On the contrary: even if local authorities' power is weakened, urbanites continue to seek political influence in rural areas. While there are certain resources, mandates, and institutions that need to be accessed through urban networks, political access, whether it is through strong voter bases for the purposes of elections, or through influence in service-delivery decision making, all reflect a strong emergence of rural centres of political power that require more research attention.

The result is a governance landscape where authority, accountability, services, and capital no longer coincide geographically, but are instead negotiated across a spatial continuum. To remain legitimate and effective, local governance must adapt to this distributed reality. Fiscal and planning frameworks should recognize translocal flows of investment and influence, while participatory mechanisms must be reimagined to include both resident and non-resident influence. Revising expectations, mandates, and resourcing of local authorities to mediate across these networks can transform translocality from a governance challenge into a basis for renewed effectiveness and legitimacy. Recognizing and institutionalizing translocal governance is not merely a technical adjustment, it is a political necessity. Doing so offers a pathway to restore confidence in governance effectiveness, align authority with lived realities, and support the combined economic and political potential of interconnected African communities.

Policy Recommendations

First, governance reforms need to tackle the mismatch between authority and accountability. This means that decentralization policies need to take into consideration that stakeholders in local governance are not geographically bound. Local authorities need to be capacitated to respond to the shifting flows of capital and influence, for instance by receiving more resources for enforcing regulations and by including absent resource owners in development planning. This requires lobbying on behalf of local authorities and, more importantly, awareness and political will at the central government level.

In addition, cooperation between local and national governments needs to be enhanced to align urban and rural development policies. To this end, more data needs to be collected and shared about translocal movements, in order to provide a basis for evidence-based policy making. Fiscal allocations and taxation also need to reflect these realities. Funds need to be allocated based on population mobility, remittance patterns, and shared service use between rural and urban areas. This again requires closer collaboration across levels of government. International partners can support the drafting and implementation of adequate decentralization policies and the data collection process.

Finally, structures for community participation need mechanisms to include absent resource owners. As assets are not under local control, and communally managed resources lose their significance, participatory structures erode. This not only creates legitimacy issues for local authorities, but also weakens trust in institutions and decreases social cohesion. The research has demonstrated that absent owners get involved with decisions affecting their assets, but without a mechanism to facilitate this, it seems like political interference rather than democratic participation. Local authorities could explore hybrid or digital participation formats to solve the barriers to remote participation. At the same time, new ways for enhancing social cohesion for those remaining in communities need to be explored jointly between local authorities and citizens in order to reap the democratic dividend of close relations at the community level.

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