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**Barriers to the Participation of the Traditional
Leadership Institution in Promoting Rural Agricultural
Development: The Case of Agricultural Projects**

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Abstract

The Traditional Leadership Institution (TLI) is constitutionally recognised to promote rural development in South Africa. It works with local government in a cooperative governance system to support agricultural development. However, it is increasingly viewed as a weaker development partner that lacks initiative and understanding of its sector-specific roles. This explains why, since the dawn of democracy in 1993, the TLI has not been fully integrated to drive rural modernisation and development. This challenge entrenches the status quo and contributes to the failure of important economic sectors like agriculture to uplift the livelihoods of rural communities. This exploratory study investigated factors that deter the TLI from effectively participating in community practices that promote agricultural development in South Africa. Data was collected from traditional leaders and council members; farmers participating in agricultural projects; municipal officials; and extension service officers in the Limpopo Province, South Africa. Focus group discussions and face-to-face interviews were used. The findings reveal four broad themes that describe barriers to participation. Barriers of a “political and relational” nature emerged as the most prominent. Further, the barriers were found to be horizontal, diagonal and vertical related. Studying and examining the complex network linkages of the barriers that were identified is critical for understanding the failure of the TLI to contribute meaningfully to agricultural development. Such an understanding serves as a springboard for adapting and devising appropriate intervention measures that could improve the integration of the TLI and community decision practices that promote agricultural development.

Keywords: *agriculture, barriers, communal farmers, rural development, traditional leadership institution.*

1. Introduction

The Traditional Leadership Institution (TLI) has a constitutional mandate to promote rural development. However, its visibility in different sectors of rural life is elusive. In rural sub-Saharan Africa (Alexander, 2006; Chinsinga, 2006), including South Africa (Logan, 2013; Mawere & Mayekiso, 2014; Tshitangoni & Francis, 2014), the TLI is an important and strategic partner to participatory development at the local level (Bikam & Chakwizira, 2014). The post-apartheid Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) recognises the TLI as a major stakeholder in rural development. Resultantly, Parliament enacted several statutes, including the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act (TLGFA) 41 of 2003 and the Local Government

Municipal Systems Amendment Act 44 of 2003 to specify the role of TLI in rural development. For instance, in chapter 5 of TLGFA, section 20(1) lists, *inter alia*, agriculture as a key sector to which the TLI should foster development.

Notwithstanding the constitutional provisions and more than twenty-seven years of post-apartheid democracy, the TLI remains incapable, outdated, incapacitated and undemocratic, making it a weaker development partner (Cramb & Willis, 1990; Mamdani, 1996; Logan, 2009; Duot, 2013; Mathonsi, & Sithole, 2017; Koenane, 2018). This points to underlying challenges that make it difficult for the TLI to fully integrate itself into rural development. In the light of the foregoing, the present study systematically shows how these contestations do not signify the TLI's irrelevance but how they amplify multifaceted deep-rooted barriers to its integration into agriculture and rural development. This study investigated why the TLI is ineffective in promoting rural agricultural development. It seeks to proffer recommendations for strengthening the participation and effectiveness of the TLI in rural development. In recent years, the role of local institutions like the TLI in participatory development regained importance in practice, scholarship and among policymakers across the globe (Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2016; Goal 16 of Sustainable Development Goals 2030) as one of the keys to sustainable development. Hence, this study contributes to strengthening institutional support to local development initiatives.

2. Literature review

The TLGFA Act 41 of 2003 requires the TLI to promote agriculture and socio-economic development in rural areas. In support of this, the Local Government Municipal Systems Amendment Act 44 of 2003 provides for the incorporation of the TLI through the Integrated Development Planning (IDP). The IDP is a five-year local government super plan for all rural development priorities in local municipalities. It is reviewed annually and mandates the local government to consult the TLI on all development matters affecting communities, including agriculture. Despite these provisions, the TLI participation in agricultural development is limited in practice. Its relevance is yet to be systematical and scientifically documented in scholarship. This is despite the TLI's known influence as a rural custodian of land rights, rural tenure systems, socio-economic practices and culture (Bikam & Chakwizira, 2014; Koenane, 2018). Local institutions like the TLI use these assets to

support local development in many regions. Thus, the integration of the TLI in rural agricultural development can offer tools and mechanisms for addressing some of the challenges faced by rural farmers.

There is consensus among scholars that the TLI faces challenges in executing its mandate. These challenges include conflicts with municipal officials (Chinsinga, 2006; Tshitangoni & Francis, 2014; Logan, 2013). Although studies have been conducted on the functionality of the TLI in different sectors, such as police and general development, the literature reveals no evidence of studies that investigated barriers to the participation of the TLI in agriculture (Bikam & Chakwizira, 2014; Mabunda, 2017). Hence, this study diagnoses sector-specific barriers to the participation of the TLI in rural agricultural development. It offers a unique opportunity to devise appropriate and context-relevant solutions to improve the integration of the TLI with the local government for it to effectively support agricultural development. Moreover, this contributes to building a stronger network of local support to rural farmers. Improved support to local agricultural projects is part of rural development strategies that aim to alleviate poverty, create jobs and boost rural economies (Aliber & Hall, 2012; Desmond & Salin, 2012). This study was conducted in the Limpopo Province, South Africa, to assess the barriers to the participation of the TLI in community practices and activities that create positive conditions of success for farmers.

The Limpopo Province has the highest (over 50%) headcount of people living in poverty in South Africa (Stats SA, 2019). It is predominantly (75%) rural (De Cock *et al.*, 2013) and has about 10% of South Africa's arable land. It produces a wide range of agricultural products, such as sorghum (43%), dry beans (22%), soybeans (4%), wheat (7%), and sunflower (10%) (Department of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (DAFF), 2019). It also produces cotton, groundnuts, tomato and maize. Current efforts to establish and strengthen agri-parks, farming cooperatives, agro-processing industries, and to offer support for youth in farming and rural farmers are parts of key provincial government initiatives. Annually, more than 1 000 rural farmers are trained to improve agricultural production (DAFF, 2019). Uncertainties around the availability of annual government support and grants, poor access to finance, service delivery challenges, limited collaborations and stakeholder support, inadequate land and labour, business skills shortage, and market access issues characterise the challenges facing agricultural projects (Aliber & Hall, 2012; Desmond & Salin, 2012; Ndlovu, *et al.*, 2021). This indicates that harnessing support from local stakeholders like the TLI is crucial in building resilience and establishing a network of

support for farmers. Therefore, knowing factors that impede the participation of the TLI in agricultural development is necessary. The methods used to carry out this study are outlined below.

3. Methodology

A cross-sectional exploratory study design was adopted to explore the views and practical experiences of participants on the barriers to the participation of the TLI in promoting rural agricultural development. Ethical clearance was sought and obtained from the University of Venda Social Research Ethics Committee (SARDF/18/IRD/06/2111) prior to engagement with the participants. Five traditional authorities in three local municipalities located in the Vhembe (Thulamela and Collins Chabane Local Municipalities) and Mopani (Greater-Giyani Local Municipality) districts in the Limpopo Province, South Africa, gave permission to conduct the study in their areas.

One hundred and three (103) respondents participated in this study. The respondents were purposively recruited from agricultural projects and included municipal officials, extension officers and non-governmental organisations that work closely with farmers. Various stakeholders assisted in the triangulation and cross-validation of the findings. Only consenting and available individual farmers and key informants were included. Out of the ten projects initially identified for investigation in this study, one was dropped due to the inadequacy of resources after the first preliminary meetings. The discontinued project is in the Collins Chabane Municipality.

Semi-structured questions were utilised with an interview guide to guide the discussions with farmers in focus groups. They were also used to conduct interviews with farm managers and key informants. In total, twenty-one (21) focus group discussions and twenty-four (24) interviews were conducted. Each focus group had a mean of four members and a range of four to five. Respondents were asked about the factors that make it difficult for the TLI to participate in community platforms and practices that promote agricultural development in their contexts. Two (2) research assistants facilitated data collection and discussions in local languages (Venda and Xitsonga) to ensure that farmers understood the issues. Prior to field deployment, assistants were inducted and oriented on interview administration, farmer engagement, how to explain issues and how to facilitate focus group discussions. Detailed notes of interviews and audio records were collected to enhance the accuracy of responses. Transcribed qualitative data was cleaned and captured into

Microsoft Excel. Thereafter, the data was imported into the Atlas Ti software version 8.1.4 to perform the thematic content analysis. In a series of coding, decoding and re-coding, major themes that describe the barriers to the participation of the TLI in agricultural development were identified. A visual network diagram showing the relationships between barriers was drawn to enhance the analysis and understanding of issues.

4. Results

4.1 Demographic Composition

Table 1 shows the demographic information of the respondents. Among one hundred and three (103) respondents, more than half (53.4%) were female. Respondents aged between 41 to 50 years (33%) were the majority. Those below the age of 30 and over 60 constituted 7.8% and 8.7%, respectively. Nearly three-quarters (70%) of respondents were over the age of 40, indicating lower participation of youth. Additionally, the majority (37.9%) of the participants had secondary education, while about a quarter (26%) had reached tertiary education.

4.2 Characteristics of agricultural projects

Forty-four per cent of farmers interviewed practised horticulture only, whereas 3 (33%) were involved in both crop and poultry farming. They produce maize, sweet potatoes, cabbage, tomatoes, Chinese cabbage, and pepper. About (22%) of the agricultural projects were involved in specialised crops. For instance, apart from horticultural crops, a project in the Greater-Giyani municipality produces a herb called *Lippia Javannica* [*Musudzungwane*]. The herb is used to produce oils for both mosquito repellents and perfumes. The farmland size ranges from 3 to 12 hectares with a mean of 5.81 hectares.

Table 1: Demographic information (N=103).

CATEGORY	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	55	53.4
Male	48	46.6
Age		
Less than 30 years	8	7.8
31 to 40 years	24	23.3
41 to 50 years	34	33.0
51 to 60 years	27	26.2
61 years and above	9	8.7
Level of Education		
Secondary Education and below	39	37.9
Matriculated	36	35.0
Tertiary qualification	27	26.2
Respondent type		
Farmers	69	67.0
Traditional leaders and council members	27	26.2
Government institutions	4	3.9
Non-governmental organisation	3	2.9

5. Barriers to the participation of the TLI in promoting rural agricultural development

Figure 1 exhibits broad and sub-themes that describe the barriers that make it difficult for the TLI to participate in community decision-making platforms and practices that promote agricultural development. These are categorised into human resources; political and relational; capital and financial resources; and organisational barriers. Table 2 shows the frequency of mentions for each set of barriers by participants.

5.1 Political and relational barriers

Contestations for political power, control over land and rural economic activities such as agriculture and arable land are common descriptors of

this theme. Political and relational barriers had the most frequency of similar responses in both FGDs (20) and interviews (12) as shown in Table 2. Among them, “poor working relations” was the most cited barrier (7 mentions in interviews and 6 in FGDs). It emerged that the relationship between the municipal officials and the TLI is characterised by conflicts. This was reflected in the responses of traditional leaders, farmers, and traditional council members. The conflicts manifest as “antagonistic service delivery provision” to farmers by the two parties in the form of open and silent conflicts, as well as power-play games. For instance, in a project where traditional leaders are visible and actively involved, the chances are that the municipality withdraws or limits its support. Results also suggested limited but existent “poor working relations” between traditional leaders and some farmers or agricultural projects.

These barriers were classified into themes and sub-themes. For instance, the “lack of clarity on agriculture-related specific roles” and the view that the traditional leadership system is incapable explain why “duties overlapped” and conflicts ensued between municipalities and traditional leaders. This went to the extent of causing what could be described as “service delivery power-play games” between the municipal officials and traditional leaders. This could explain limited collaborations and partnerships between traditional leaders and municipalities in support of rural development programmes that have the potential to benefit farmers.

5.2 Human resource barriers

“Inadequate staff”, “limited skills development opportunities” and “skills challenges” were the descriptors of the human capital-related barriers that hinder the participation of the TLI in promoting agricultural development. Amongst them, “lack of specialised skills” was mentioned the most (11) in both interviews and FGDs, while “inadequate staff” and “absence of professional help” were the least mentioned (Table 2). Lack of clarity on roles and standardised criteria on what traditional leaders and council members need to do in support of agriculture make it difficult to know the specific skills and roles required to effectively support agricultural development.

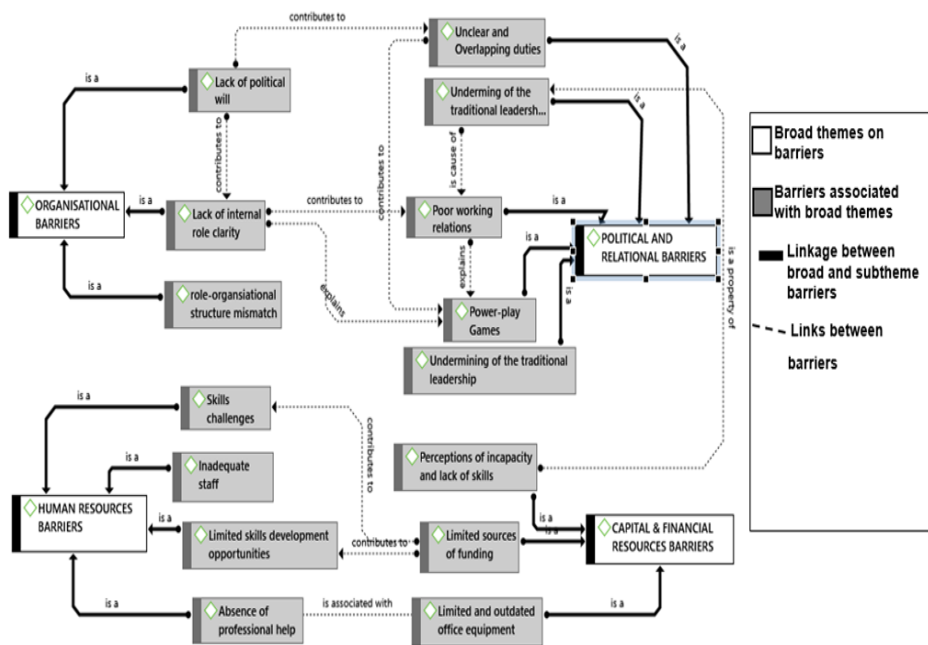


Figure 1: Atlas Ti network diagram on barriers to the participation of the TLI in promoting agricultural projects in Limpopo Province, South Africa

5.3 Lack of capital and financial resources

This component has the following descriptors: “limited and outdated office equipment; limited funding and fewer sources of income; and perceptions of incapacity and lack of skills”. Results suggest that limited funding is partly caused by a “lack of political will” to increase funding by the government. Moreover, the view that the TLI is incompetent or incompatible to effectively drive rural development was cited as part of the reasons why the government is reluctant to provide more financial resources.

In this category, “limited funding” (11 mentions) and “inadequate and outdated office equipment” (7 mentions) occurred the most, respectively (Table 2). Similar views were expressed across all the participating geographical areas. For example, “limited funding” had five mentions in Giyani, 4 in Thulamela and 2 in the Collins Chabane region. Funding constraints were viewed because of “fewer sources of income”. It also emerged from the results that available financial resources are only

enough for rudimentary service delivery activities by traditional leaders. Hence, they are not enough to extend the required support to farmers or projects

The study revealed that “outdated and shortage of basic modern office-related equipment” make it difficult for the TLI to adequately support and improve its service delivery in local development projects. The lack of “stationary”, “computers”, “office furniture”, “reliable internet access equipment” and “printing machines” is a further impediment. All these financial and capital-related barriers make the participation of the TLI in supporting rural agricultural projects very difficult. This is further worsened by organisational barriers explained in the next section.

Table 2: Themes on barriers to the participation of the TLI associated with 21 focus group discussions

FGDs	Themes and sub-themes											
	Human Resources			Political and relational barriers				Capital and Financial resources barriers			Organisational barriers	
	Inadequate staff	Skills challenges	Limited skills development opportunities	Poor working relations	Unclear and overlapping roles	Undermining traditional leaders	Power play games	Limited and outdated office equipment	Limited funding and fewer sources of income	Perceptions of incapacity and lack of skills	Role-structure organisational miss-match	Internal lack of role specificity
Sub-total	2	7	3	6	5	5	4	3	4	5	4	5
Total	12			23				12			9	

KEY: FGDs 1 to 3 are from the traditional leadership councils; FGDs 4 to 21 came from agricultural projects/farmers’

5.4 Organisational barriers

The “organogram” and “lack of role specialisation” within the TLI were cited as organisational barriers that explain the difficulty faced by the TLI in participating effectively in community decision-making platforms that promote agriculture. Organisational barriers were the least quoted (9 quotations as shown in Table 2). It emerged that the current TLI organogram does not reflect role specialisation when it comes to

promoting sector-specific rural development activities. Thus, it is not clear who, how, and the extent to which each unit is responsible for promoting agricultural development initiatives. Hence, there is a lack of standardised agriculture-specific roles for traditional leaders. Some sub-themes like “lack of political will” influenced the perceived slow progress in role definition and clarification.

A key informant from an NGO in the Collins Chabane municipal area highlighted that

... how our tribal authorities are organised, there is little they can do in support of agricultural projects or agriculture in general. As you already know, there is a senior traditional leader who is a chair in the institution. The nominated and elected council members are supposed to be the long arm of the institution in doing its work. However, they are only a handful and in most cases, these members are not activated.

This takes away the opportunity for the TLI to contribute meaningfully to local agricultural support through council members. In addition, a lack of task specialisation and coordination skills from members of the council entrench organisational barriers. It was also revealed that although there are legal provisions on how to constitute the structure of councillors, each tribal authority has the prerogative to operationalise and decide how to support community development.

6. Discussion of results

Results revealed that political and relational barriers pose the most challenge to the participation of the TLI in promoting and supporting rural agricultural development. “Poor working relations”; “unclear and overlapping roles”; “undermining of the traditional leadership”; and “power-play games” were used to describe how these barriers manifest. Results showed evidence of power-play games centred around service delivery conflicts. This has been observed in previous studies by Bikam & Chakwizira (2014) and Mathonsi & Sithole (2017). Elongated conflicts build hostile socio-economic environments. A lack of unity of purpose harms the potential benefits of multi-stakeholder partnerships and compromise work towards the fulfilment of shared responsibilities and participatory action for sustainable development. Mabunda (2017) found that some traditional leaders do not know their roles in community partnership initiatives. Chigwata (2016) warn that unresolved conflicts result in “role burnout” in which power games and conflicts between

parties result in one party giving up their roles and duties in favour of latent peace. Therefore, it is important to resolve conflicts speedily and to introduce stakeholder partnerships and collaboration training programmes. These assist in the reduction of tensions, demystifying role boundaries, and avoiding unhealthy conflicts between stakeholders.

Human resource barriers include inadequate and unspecialised personnel, limited skills, training and development opportunities. The literature shows that human resource constraints like lack of role and task specification are a common challenge among indigenous organisations in rural development (Ortas *et al.*, 2019). The absence of a standardised criteria of activities and practices that constitute the promotion of agricultural development inhibits the effective participation of traditional leaders. Management literature demonstrates that the success of organisations lies in the mix of the role and process clarity that syncs with the organogram and individual skills (Middlehurst, 1995; Shibru *et al.*, 2017). Kessey (2006) observed that a lack of clear roles causes conflicts in organisations that operate at the same level in community decision making.

Results and literature analysis suggest that the lack of role specification might also be rooted in the TLI's historical and evolutionary processes. For example, during apartheid, the roles and subsequent organogram of the TLI were defined and designed to serve the separate development agenda of the apartheid government over tribal lands (The Black Administration Act 38 of 1927; The Bantu Authorities Act 68 of 1951; Mthembu, 2008; Ncube, 2017). This deterred and hindered the ability of the TLI to adapt to the changing needs of society to provide the necessary support for rural development projects (Ndlovu, *et al.*, 2020). This is why enabling statutes and structures like the TLGFA Act 41 of 2003, Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000 and the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) were enacted and established to define the role of the TLI in rural development. Therefore, it is important for the TLI organogram to specify the responsibilities, duties, functions, tasks, and processes to different departments, units, and individuals within the TLI in line with its mandated rural development goals.

Other barriers are related to capital and financial resources. These are “limited funding and fewer sources of income”, “limited and outdated office equipment” and “inadequate infrastructure and support”. COGTA (2017: 9) similarly reported that “for traditional leaders to function more effectively, there is a need to provide more resources in terms of finance and office equipment”. An investigation by Bikam & Chakwizira (2014)

into the role of traditional leaders in rural development projects and their challenges found that if adequately resourced, the TLI could improve service delivery and become a viable player in rural development support systems. This finding is like the one arrived at by COGTA (2017).

The literature shows that comprehensive and impactful support for local development activities comes from multi-stakeholder partnerships (Adekunle & Fatunbi, 2012; Kuijpers *et al.*, 2015). Multi-stakeholder and mutual participation of local organisations like the TLI create multifaceted opportunities and support to rural economic activities like agriculture (Uphoff 2004; Uphoff_Buck, 2006; 4th World Forum of Local Economic Development, 2017). As part of strengthening the TLI's effectiveness in promoting agricultural development, it is crucial to target and manage these barriers while observing their source and relationship.

7. Conclusion

This study investigated the barriers to the participation of the TLI in community decision-making platforms and practices that promote rural agricultural development. It emerged that these barriers manifest in both the internal and external environment. Broadly, they are categorised into organisational; capital and financial resources; human resources; and political and relational barriers. The barriers are related, complex and embedded in technical, organisational, regulatory, historical, and evolutionary cultural elements of the TLI. While some barriers might be partially overcome through greater regulatory and political support, it is evident that other barriers like organisational and human resource nature require an internally driven intervention strategy to be minimised. Given the results, it can be concluded that the most problematic barriers must be targeted first. These are political and human resource barriers. The interconnectedness and causal effect between barriers suggest that targeting the most common barriers will simultaneously address other barriers. For instance, the availing of training programmes in multi-stakeholder engagement and conflict management programmes is likely to improve poor working relations within municipalities and agricultural projects.

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