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Historical Memory, Community Identity and Economic Growth in Epworth, Mashonaland East Province, Zimbabwe: Evidence for a Place-Based Development Framework

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Abstract: *Economic development in historically marginalised peri-urban settlements requires approaches that recognise both material constraints and locally embedded social and institutional conditions. This study examined how historical memory, institutional legitimacy and governance, community identity and social capital, and participation and economic activity shape local economic development in Epworth, Zimbabwe, and used the findings to develop a place-based development framework. A pragmatist philosophy and convergent parallel mixed-methods design were adopted. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires from 386 residents, entrepreneurs and community stakeholders, while qualitative evidence was obtained through interviews, focus group discussions, observations and document analysis. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were analysed thematically and integrated with the quantitative findings. The findings indicate that historical memory is associated with community participation and perceptions of development legitimacy. Institutional fragmentation, insecure land tenure and weak coordination were identified as important constraints on investment, enterprise development and local economic participation. Community identity and social capital were positively associated with participation, although strong internal networks could also create exclusionary effects for newcomers and marginalised groups. Informal enterprises were important livelihood and economic participation mechanisms but remained constrained by limited finance, infrastructure and institutional support. The study contributes a place-based perspective by demonstrating how historical memory, institutional legitimacy, community identity, social capital, participation and economic activity interact in shaping local economic development. A conceptual framework is proposed to guide tenure reform, coordinated governance, infrastructure development, enterprise support, skills development, participatory planning and heritage-based initiatives in Epworth.*

Keywords: *Economic Growth, Historical Memory, Community Identity, Institutional Legitimacy, Social Capital, Informal Economy, Local Economic Development*

I. INTRODUCTION

Economic growth in informal urban settlements remains one of the persistent development challenges across the Global South, where rapid urbanisation continues to outpace infrastructure provision, employment creation and institutional capacity (UN-Habitat, 2022; World Bank, 2024). In Zimbabwe, informal settlements have become integral to urban expansion, accommodating populations excluded from formal housing and labour markets while simultaneously supporting vibrant informal economic activities. Epworth exemplifies this duality. Despite its proximity to Harare and its entrepreneurial potential, the settlement continues to experience widespread poverty, insecure land tenure, inadequate infrastructure, weak institutional coordination and unemployment (ZIMSTAT, 2022; Munyoro et al., 2026). These structural challenges constrain inclusive local economic development. Contemporary research emphasises that economic transformation in informal settlements requires place-based approaches that integrate institutional strengthening, participatory governance and local development rather than relying solely on conventional modernisation models (UN-Habitat, 2022; World Bank, 2024).

Although several initiatives have sought to improve livelihoods in Epworth through infrastructure upgrading, informal enterprise support and decentralised development programmes, their impacts have remained limited and uneven (UNDP, 2023). Existing literature attributes these outcomes to fragmented governance structures, overlapping institutional responsibilities, inconsistent policy implementation and limited community participation (OECD, 2023; World Bank, 2024). Furthermore, many economic development approaches continue to prioritise technical and financial interventions while giving insufficient attention to the historical and socio-cultural contexts that influence development outcomes. Emerging evidence

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indicates that historical institutional arrangements, community identity and collective memory shape institutional trust, participation and the sustainability of development interventions (OECD, 2023; UNDP, 2023).

Despite increasing recognition of inclusive and place-based development, an important knowledge gap remains regarding the relationship between historical memory, community identity, institutional legitimacy and local economic transformation in Zimbabwe's informal settlements. Existing studies have largely examined governance, informality, poverty and infrastructure independently, with limited attention to how shared historical experiences and community identity can strengthen institutional legitimacy, stakeholder collaboration and locally driven economic development (UN-Habitat, 2022; World Bank, 2024). Research on Epworth has predominantly focused on settlement formation, land tenure, environmental challenges and urban informality, providing limited insight into how historical memory and community identity influence local economic development.

This study addresses this gap by examining local economic development in Epworth through the interconnected constructs of historical memory; institutional legitimacy and governance; community identity and social capital; and participation and economic activity. Historical memory is conceptualised as a contextual resource that shapes perceptions of institutional legitimacy and development interventions, while community identity and social capital influence collective action and economic participation. Institutional legitimacy and governance concern the perceived fairness, transparency, accountability and responsiveness of institutions and the extent to which governance arrangements facilitate participation and economic activity. Drawing on institutional theory, place-based development and community-driven development perspectives, the study argues that local economic development depends not only on financial investment and infrastructure but also on historical experiences, institutional arrangements, collective identities and participatory processes.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

A. Institutional Legitimacy and Governance in Epworth

Epworth's institutional evolution provides an essential context for understanding its contemporary local economic development challenges. Established in the late nineteenth century as a Methodist missionary settlement, Epworth evolved into one of Zimbabwe's largest peri-urban settlements through urbanisation, informal land occupation and rural-urban migration. This historical trajectory produced complex governance arrangements involving the Methodist Church, local authorities, central government and community organisations (Chirisa et al., 2022; UN-Habitat, 2022). These historical institutional arrangements should not be treated as a separate study construct but as contextual factors influencing institutional legitimacy and governance. Institutional theory argues that predictable rules, secure property rights, accountable institutions and legitimate governance arrangements are important for investment and economic development (North, 1990; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2019). In Epworth, historical institutional arrangements have contributed to competing centres of authority and uncertainty concerning land administration, planning responsibilities and resource allocation.

Unresolved land tenure arrangements remain an important institutional constraint. Insecure property rights and overlapping legal frameworks can discourage investment, restrict access to formal finance and constrain entrepreneurial activities because land cannot readily serve as collateral (World Bank, 2023). At the same time, longstanding tensions between state institutions and community-based organisations may weaken institutional trust and reduce participation in development initiatives (UN-Habitat, 2022). Institutional trust is therefore treated in this study as an indicator of institutional legitimacy and governance, rather than as a separate construct. Accordingly, this study conceptualises institutional legitimacy and governance as encompassing institutional trust, transparency, accountability, responsiveness, coordination and clarity of responsibilities. Historical institutional arrangements provide the context within which these governance relationships have developed.

B. Historical Memory, Community Identity and Social Capital

Collective memory and community identity are important social dimensions of local economic development, particularly in historically marginalised urban settlements such as Epworth. Collective memory refers to shared interpretations of historical experiences that shape community values, institutional trust and perceptions of legitimacy (Halbwachs, 1992; Assmann, 2011). Community identity reflects a shared sense of belonging that influences collective action, social cohesion and participation in development processes (Jenkins, 2014). In Epworth, political marginalisation, insecure land tenure, informal settlement growth and fragmented governance have created competing narratives of belonging, entitlement and development priorities. Long-term residents may regard themselves as legitimate custodians of the settlement, while newer residents may bring different socioeconomic aspirations and expectations. These differences can influence trust, cooperation and participation. Social capital theory suggests that communities characterised by trust, shared identity and reciprocal relationships are better positioned to mobilise collective economic action (Ostrom, 2015; Putnam, 2000). However, strong bonding social capital may also reinforce exclusion and historical divisions, limiting inclusive local economic development

(Aldrich, 2021). Historical memory may therefore strengthen collective identity and participation while simultaneously reproducing boundaries between established and newer groups.

C. Implications for Local Economic Development

Economic planning in Epworth must account for its historical and institutional context rather than focusing solely on infrastructure, investment, employment and enterprise development. Economic planning is more effective when institutional legitimacy, historical realities and community participation reinforce one another (Rodrik, 2021; World Bank, 2023). In Epworth, contested governance, insecure land tenure, fragmented institutional authority and diverse community identities shape the implementation and sustainability of development initiatives. Ignoring these conditions can result in weak local ownership and limited participation despite financial investment (OECD, 2023). Accordingly, the study proposes a framework linking historical memory, institutional legitimacy and governance, community identity and social capital, participation and economic activity, and local economic development. The framework assumes that historical experiences shape perceptions of institutions, institutional legitimacy influences participation, community identity and social capital facilitate collective action, and participation and economic activity contribute to local economic development.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a pragmatist research philosophy, which provided an appropriate foundation for integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine local economic development in Epworth through five interconnected constructs: historical memory; institutional legitimacy and governance; community identity and social capital; participation and economic activity; and local economic development. Pragmatism recognises that complex social and economic phenomena require multiple forms of evidence and therefore supports methodological pluralism (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Morgan, 2022).

A deductive-inductive mixed-methods approach was employed. Deductive reasoning was used to examine theoretically informed relationships among the five constructs, whereas inductive reasoning facilitated identification of context-specific experiences, meanings and explanations emerging from the data. The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analysed independently and subsequently integrated (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The principal quantitative instrument was a structured questionnaire comprising predominantly five-point Likert-type items measuring the five study constructs. Qualitative data were collected using semi-structured interview and focus-group discussion guides, an observation guide and a documentary review schedule. Instrument development was informed by the literature and theoretical framework. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with coefficients of approximately .70 or higher regarded as acceptable (Hair et al., 2022).

Quantitative and qualitative data were initially analysed independently before integration. Quantitative analysis employed descriptive statistics, correlation, multiple regression, mediation and moderation analysis and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), where appropriate (Hair et al., 2022; Kline, 2023). These techniques were used to examine the hypothesised relationships among historical memory, institutional legitimacy and governance, community identity and social capital, participation and economic activity, and local economic development. Qualitative data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2022). Findings were integrated through joint displays, side-by-side comparison, triangulation and meta-inferences (Fetters et al., 2013; Guetterman et al., 2023).

IV. FINDINGS

A. Response Rate, Demographic Characteristics and Data Quality Assessment

The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to examine how historical memory, institutional legitimacy and governance, community identity and social capital, and participation and economic activity were associated with local economic development in Epworth.

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Historical memory	6	0.84
Institutional legitimacy and governance	7	0.87
Community identity and social capital	14	0.84
Participation and economic activity	7	0.88
Local economic development	8	0.86

The quantitative instrument measured the study constructs using multi-item scales, while qualitative data provided contextual explanations of the patterns observed in the survey results. The internal consistency assessment indicated satisfactory to high reliability across the reported constructs. Historical memory was measured using six items and recorded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.84. Institutional legitimacy and governance comprised seven items and recorded an alpha of 0.87.

Community identity and social capital was measured using 14 items and recorded an alpha of 0.84, while participation and economic activity comprised seven items and recorded an alpha of 0.88. These coefficients exceeded the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency for the scales used in the analysis. The reliability results therefore provided an adequate basis for subsequent descriptive, correlation and regression analyses. The qualitative component complemented these results by explaining how residents interpreted historical belonging, institutional arrangements, community relationships and participation in local economic activities.

B. Historical Memory and Development Identity

The findings indicate that historical memory was associated with residents' perceptions of belonging, development legitimacy and participation in Epworth (Connerton, 1989; Assmann, 2011). Survey responses showed strong attachment to Epworth's historical identity, particularly its Methodist mission legacy, educational traditions, community organisation and contribution to social development (Munyoro, 2026). This finding suggests that historical memory operates as a socially constructed reference point through which residents interpret contemporary development processes rather than as an indicator of resilience or foresight (Halbwachs, 1992; Assmann, 2011; Munyoro, 2026). Regression analysis showed a significant positive association between historical memory and community participation, with historical memory accounting for 28.6% of the variation in participation levels ($\beta = 0.536$, $p < 0.001$). The qualitative findings provided further explanation, with participants describing the Methodist mission legacy as an important source of education, leadership development and collective responsibility (Munyoro, 2026). However, historical memory was not uniformly inclusive. Some younger residents indicated that claims to being "original" community members could create boundaries between established residents and newer generations (Connerton, 1989; Halbwachs, 1992). The findings therefore demonstrate the dual character of historical memory: it can strengthen collective identity and provide continuity between past and present, while simultaneously producing distinctions concerning who is regarded as belonging to the community (Connerton, 1989; Assmann, 2011). Historical memory should consequently be understood as an important contextual factor shaping development identity and participation rather than as an inherently positive community resource (Assmann, 2011; Munyoro, 2026).

C. Institutional Legitimacy and Governance

The mixed-methods findings indicate that institutional arrangements are important to understanding contemporary economic development conditions in Epworth, particularly given the continuing challenges associated with governance, institutional coordination, urbanisation and service delivery in Zimbabwe (World Bank, 2024; World Bank, 2025). Survey respondents identified institutional fragmentation as a significant constraint, particularly where responsibilities among institutions were perceived to be unclear or overlapping. This finding is consistent with recent evidence on Zimbabwe's regulatory environment, which identifies overlapping mandates among government ministries, departments and agencies as a source of additional procedural and compliance burdens for firms (World Bank, 2025). Pearson correlation analysis demonstrated a significant negative association between governance fragmentation and perceived local economic development potential ($r = -0.61$, $p < 0.001$). This finding indicates that higher perceptions of fragmentation were associated with lower perceptions of local development potential. The qualitative evidence provided historical and institutional context for this relationship, particularly through participants' accounts of Epworth's transition from earlier mission-related administration to contemporary urban governance structures. This institutional complexity is also consistent with broader evidence that Zimbabwe continues to face governance and institutional challenges that affect development outcomes and private-sector activity (World Bank, 2024).

Land tenure insecurity emerged as an important institutional concern, reflecting the continuing challenges surrounding land administration and tenure security in Zimbabwean urban and peri-urban settlements (Musakwa et al., 2023; World Bank, 2024). Specifically, 72.9% of respondents indicated that uncertain land ownership arrangements discouraged business investment and housing improvements. Enterprise owners further reported that insecure tenure constrained their ability to use property or land-related assets to obtain formal finance. This is consistent with recent evidence that insecure or inadequately transferable tenure arrangements can reduce the bankability of land and constrain access to investment finance (IFC, 2024). The continued importance of tenure security in Epworth is also reflected in recent efforts to regularise informal settlements and provide title deeds to residents, although implementation challenges have remained evident (GoZ, 2023; ZimTracker, 2024). These findings are consistent with wider evidence that regulatory complexity, overlapping institutional mandates and uncertainty can increase the costs and risks facing small enterprises in Zimbabwe (Mago & Modiba, 2024; World Bank, 2025;). The World Bank has similarly identified fragmented regulatory requirements and overlapping institutional responsibilities as constraints on private-sector investment and firm growth, noting that some Zimbabwean sectors face numerous regulatory requirements administered by multiple government agencies (World Bank, 2025). The findings therefore support the use of institutional legitimacy and governance as the appropriate construct for explaining how institutional arrangements shape confidence, coordination, investment conditions and local economic development, particularly in settings

where the effectiveness and clarity of institutional mandates influence the business environment and development processes (World Bank, 2024; World Bank, 2025).

D. Community Identity, Social Capital and Participation

The quantitative findings indicate that community identity and social capital were positively associated with participation and economic activity in Epworth. A questionnaire administered to 320 respondents assessed community attachment, historical belonging, trust, collective action, institutional confidence, and involvement in economic initiatives. The results showed that 74.1% of respondents agreed that belonging to Epworth influenced their willingness to participate in community economic activities, while 68.4% indicated that shared historical experiences encouraged cooperation. Community identity recorded a relatively high mean score ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.81$), compared with institutional trust ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.12$). In this analysis, institutional trust is treated as an indicator of institutional legitimacy rather than as a separate study construct. Correlation analysis demonstrated significant positive associations between community identity and participation ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$), as well as between social capital and participation in local economic initiatives ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$). However, the findings also reveal a potentially exclusionary dimension of strong community networks. Approximately 36.9% of respondents reported that economic opportunities were sometimes controlled by established community networks, with possible implications for newcomers, young entrepreneurs, and other marginalised groups. These findings therefore suggest that social capital is not uniformly beneficial. While community networks can facilitate information sharing, trust, cooperation, and access to economic opportunities, they may also create social boundaries that influence who can access economic resources. Overall, the quantitative evidence indicates that community identity and social capital can strengthen participation and local economic engagement, while their benefits may be unevenly distributed across different groups within the community.

E. Participation and Economic Activity in Epworth

Participation and economic activity represented the practical dimension through which residents engaged with the local economy, particularly through employment, self-employment, small-scale enterprise and other income-generating activities (ILO, 2024; ZIMSTAT, 2024). Informal economic activity constituted an important component of this participation, encompassing activities such as street vending, small retail businesses, home-based enterprises, food sales, informal transport services, recycling and casual labour. Evidence from Zimbabwe demonstrates the extensive scale of informal economic activity: ZIMSTAT (2024) reported that informal employment accounted for 85.5% of all employed persons in the third quarter of 2024 and 83.1% of employment in non-agricultural activities. Survey results from the present study indicated widespread participation in informal income-generating activities, with informal trading and vending representing the dominant forms of economic engagement, followed by home-based enterprises, casual labour, transport-related activities and other livelihood activities (Munyoro et al., 2026). These findings are consistent with evidence on the central role of informality in Zimbabwe's labour and livelihood economy. The World Bank (2026) reports that approximately 80% of Zimbabweans currently work in the informal sector and observes that labour has increasingly shifted towards low-productivity retail and informal services rather than formal manufacturing and higher-value services. Similarly, the ILO (2024) identifies macroeconomic conditions, regulatory frameworks, institutional arrangements and enforcement mechanisms, alongside micro-level factors, as important influences on informality in Zimbabwe. Earlier evidence from the African Development Bank (AfDB, 2020) likewise indicates that non-agricultural employment across Africa remains substantially concentrated in the informal sector, particularly where formal job creation has not kept pace with labour-force growth. The Epworth findings should therefore be interpreted within the broader structure of Zimbabwe's labour, enterprise and livelihood economy rather than as an isolated local phenomenon. Informal activities are treated in this study as empirical manifestations of participation and economic activity, reflecting the ways in which residents engage in income generation and local markets. They are not interpreted as indicators of institutional resilience, service-delivery efficiency or any other superseded construct. This distinction is important because the prevalence of informal economic activity demonstrates the nature and extent of residents' economic participation, but does not, by itself, establish the effectiveness of local institutions or the quality-of-service delivery.

F. Entrepreneurship as a Dimension of Economic Activity

Entrepreneurship in Epworth was shaped by both necessity and opportunity considerations (Masocha, 2017; Mupoperi & Venganai, 2023; Munyoro et al, 2026). Participants reported entering informal businesses because of unemployment, retrenchment, household responsibilities and inadequate formal employment income, while others viewed entrepreneurship as a pathway to economic independence, livelihood improvement and income generation (Masocha, 2017; ILO, 2024; Munyoro et al, 2026). This reflects evidence that self-employment and informal economic activities are important sources of household income in Epworth, where access to formal employment is constrained (Chikazaza & Ncube, 2022). The sustainability and growth of enterprises were influenced by access to finance, business knowledge, markets, social networks and household resources (ZIMSTAT & FinMark Trust, 2022; Mbira, 2024). The FinScope MSME Survey identified access to finance as a major constraint for Zimbabwean MSMEs, with informal mechanisms such as *mukando* commonly used to meet business financing needs (ZIMSTAT & FinMark Trust, 2022). Financial and technical skills, market access and business performance also affect

entrepreneurs' ability to obtain and utilise financing (Mbira, 2024). Social networks were particularly important for accessing suppliers, customers, information and informal financial assistance (Mupoperi & Venganai, 2023; Tsarwe & Mare, 2021). Zimbabwean entrepreneurs use social and digital networks to exchange business information, identify markets and suppliers, access informal credit and maintain customer relationships (Tsarwe & Mare, 2021). However, such networks may also create financial and social obligations (Mupoperi & Venganai, 2023). Nationally, entrepreneurship and MSMEs remain central to economic activity amid widespread informality and limited formal employment opportunities. The 2022 FinScope MSME Survey estimated approximately 1.64 million MSME business owners in Zimbabwe, with individual entrepreneurs constituting the majority (ZIMSTAT & FinMark Trust, 2022). Recent ILO initiatives have further emphasised entrepreneurship training, financial literacy and business development for women and youth (ILO, 2025a, 2025b). Overall, entrepreneurship in Epworth is embedded in broader institutional, social and economic conditions. Limited formal employment, livelihood needs, access to finance, business capabilities, markets and social networks collectively shape residents' capacity to establish, sustain and expand enterprises.

G. Relationship Between Participation and Economic Activity

Regression analysis examined the relationship between participation and economic activity and the other study constructs. The analysis considered whether historical memory, institutional legitimacy and governance, community identity and social capital, and other theoretically justified variables were associated with variation in participation and economic activity. Household characteristics such as educational attainment, employment status, access to finance and household size were considered where their inclusion was theoretically justified (World Bank, 2024; ZIMSTAT, 2024). The interpretation of regression coefficients remained associative because the cross-sectional mixed-methods design did not establish temporal precedence or experimental control. Thus, a statistically significant relationship between access to finance and economic activity indicates that financial access is associated with differences in participation or enterprise activity; it does not demonstrate that access to credit alone causes improved economic outcomes (Savitz & Wellenius, 2023). This distinction is particularly important in Epworth because economic activity is simultaneously shaped by institutional conditions, household circumstances, community networks and wider macroeconomic pressures. Evidence from Zimbabwe indicates that access to finance, macroeconomic instability, infrastructure deficits and the business environment interact in shaping private-sector development (IFC, 2024; World Bank, 2025a). The relevance of social and community networks is also supported by research on small-scale entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe. For example, Mutsindikwa and Gelderblom (2023) found that social networks and rotating savings and credit associations provided mechanisms through which small-scale entrepreneurs in Harare mobilised working capital and managed business risks. Such evidence supports interpreting community identity and social capital as potentially relevant contextual factors rather than treating economic activity as a function of individual financial resources alone. The World Bank similarly identifies financing constraints, regulatory conditions and the wider business environment as important determinants of private-sector growth in Zimbabwe (World Bank, 2025a, 2025b).

H. Constraints Affecting Economic Activity

Despite the contribution of informal enterprises to household livelihoods, respondents identified several constraints affecting economic activity, including limited access to finance, unreliable consumer demand, competition, regulatory pressures and inadequate infrastructure (IFC, 2024; ZNCC, 2024). Recent national evidence reinforces the significance of these constraints. The ZNCC's 2024 business survey identified monetary and fiscal distortions, low demand, poor roads and infrastructure, unreliable electricity, limited access to finance and bureaucratic processes among the major challenges reported by businesses (ZNCC, 2024). In addition, the World Bank's Zimbabwe Economic Update identifies regulatory complexity, multiple licensing and inspection requirements, fees and fragmented institutional responsibilities as constraints that can increase compliance costs, particularly for small firms (World Bank, 2025a, 2025b). These constraints were interpreted in relation to the study's four explanatory constructs and the outcome construct of local economic development. Institutional legitimacy and governance influenced the regulatory and investment environment within which enterprises operated, while community identity and social capital affected access to networks, information and economic opportunities. Evidence from Zimbabwean small-scale enterprises indicates that social networks can facilitate access to finance, information and collective coping mechanisms, although such networks may also create exclusionary pressures and competition for economic opportunities (Mutsindikwa & Gelderblom, 2023). Historical memory influenced perceptions of belonging and the legitimacy of development processes, while participation and economic activity represented the observable ways in which residents engaged with local markets and livelihood opportunities.

The findings correspond with national evidence that Zimbabwean enterprises face regulatory complexity, high compliance costs, limited access to finance and infrastructure-related constraints (IFC, 2024; World Bank, 2025a). The World Bank's 2025 Zimbabwe Economic Update reports that regulatory requirements can involve multiple government agencies and that overlapping mandates, fees and manual administrative processes increase the costs of doing business, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (World Bank, 2025a). Similarly, the IFC's Country Private Sector Diagnostic identifies

macroeconomic instability, limited access to finance, a weak business environment, and gaps in energy, transport and digital infrastructure as major constraints to private-sector development in Zimbabwe (IFC, 2024). National labour-market evidence also demonstrates the importance of informal economic activity to livelihoods. ZIMSTAT's Quarterly Labour Force Survey reports substantial employment in the informal non-agricultural sector, illustrating the importance of informal economic activity within Zimbabwe's wider labour market (ZIMSTAT, 2024). More recently, ZIMSTAT's Economic Census reported that 76.1% of the 204,798 operational establishments identified in its preliminary results were informal, further demonstrating the substantial role of informal economic activity in the national economy (ZIMSTAT, 2025). Consequently, constraints affecting Epworth's enterprises cannot be attributed to individual entrepreneurial capacity alone; they reflect the interaction between institutional, social, historical and economic conditions. This interpretation is consistent with recent Zimbabwean evidence showing that enterprise performance and livelihood strategies are embedded within broader regulatory, infrastructural, financial and social environments (IFC, 2024; Mutsindikwa & Gelderblom, 2023; World Bank, 2025a).

I. Synthesis of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrates that local economic development in Epworth is shaped by the interaction of historical memory, institutional legitimacy and governance, community identity and social capital, and participation in economic activity. Historical memory influenced residents' sense of belonging, collective identity and perceptions of development legitimacy, with quantitative results showing a significant positive association between historical memory and participation ($\beta = 0.536$, $p < 0.001$). This aligns with evidence that Epworth's distinctive historical trajectory and residents' attachment to place influence settlement, governance and development processes. Resident participation has also been shown to support identification of local priorities and settlement-upgrading interventions (Chitekwe-Biti et al., 2012). Institutional legitimacy and governance affected perceptions of coordination, confidence and investment conditions. Governance fragmentation was negatively associated with perceived local economic development potential ($r = -0.61$, $p < 0.001$). This reflects documented tensions between formal governance arrangements and Epworth's predominantly informal settlement and economy, including fragmented institutional responsibilities affecting local food systems (Chigumira et al., 2018). Governance quality has likewise been linked to economic development outcomes in Zimbabwe (Musvota & Mukonza, 2022). Community identity and social capital strengthened participation, demonstrated by positive relationships between community identity and participation ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$) and social capital and participation ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$). However, qualitative evidence indicates that social capital can also exclude newcomers and socially less-connected groups. Its developmental value therefore depends on whether institutions enable individuals with weaker networks to access information, resources and opportunities. Participation translates social relationships and institutional opportunities into livelihoods and enterprise activities. This is consistent with evidence of the central role of informal economic activity in Epworth (Chirisa & Muhomba, 2013; Tawodzera, 2022) and the ILO's emphasis on improving working conditions, social protection and enterprise support for informal workers (ILO, 2023, 2024). Overall, local economic development in Epworth is multidimensional, requiring coordinated governance, infrastructure, finance, market access, entrepreneurship support and participatory planning alongside recognition of informal livelihoods.

V. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Strengthening Institutional Legitimacy and Land Administration

i) *Formalising Land Tenure While Respecting Community Norms*

Sustainable local economic development in Epworth requires a land governance approach that combines tenure security with existing community norms and historical settlement practices (Bandauko & Chirisa, 2022; Musemwa, 2013). Research on Epworth indicates that conventional housing and land-management arrangements have historically struggled to provide low-income households with accessible and secure tenure, while social relationships and local settlement practices have influenced access to land (Musemwa, 2013). A phased and participatory tenure-upgrading strategy should therefore recognise existing occupancy while gradually improving legal security through participatory mapping, local knowledge integration, household enumeration and transparent land administration (UN-Habitat, 2023). Such an approach is consistent with tenure-responsive land-use planning, which emphasises participatory, gender-sensitive and locally appropriate approaches to improving tenure security and settlement planning (UN-Habitat, 2021).

ii) *Creating a Coordinated Development Authority*

Epworth requires stronger coordination among government agencies, local authorities, civil society, private actors and communities to address fragmented mandates and inconsistent development interventions. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2025) emphasises that effective responses to informality require coordination across government institutions and meaningful participation by workers, enterprises and other stakeholders. A participatory coordination mechanism can therefore strengthen accountability, clarify responsibilities and improve policy coherence, particularly where land administration, infrastructure, livelihoods and local economic development intersect (Government of Zimbabwe, 2021;

ILO, 2025). The emphasis should remain on institutional legitimacy and governance, rather than on creating a separate institutional resilience construct.

B. Infrastructure and Local Economic Development

Infrastructure development should enhance productivity, inclusion, market access and spatial integration. The ILO (2015) identifies access to infrastructure, technology, markets, finance, education and skills as important components of an integrated approach to supporting sustainable enterprises and facilitating the transition from informality to formality. Improved road networks, transport connectivity, water, energy and sanitation can reduce constraints on households and enterprises and create conditions conducive to local economic development. In informal settlements, UN-Habitat (2021) similarly links participatory settlement upgrading with improvements in basic services, tenure security and local livelihoods. Infrastructure should therefore be treated as a policy intervention supporting local economic development, rather than as evidence of a separate service-delivery efficiency construct.

C. Local Enterprise Development and Employment Creation

i) *Supporting the Informal Economy*

Given the importance of informal economic activities in Zimbabwe, policy should focus on supportive formalisation rather than displacement (ILO, 2015; Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency [ZIMSTAT], 2024). The 2024 Quarterly Labour Force Survey reported that informally employed persons constituted 86.8% of all employed persons, demonstrating the continuing importance of informality to livelihoods nationally (ZIMSTAT, 2024). Local authorities should therefore establish enterprise hubs providing affordable workspaces, business training, market information, financial services and legal support. Such measures are consistent with ILO Recommendation No. 204, which advocates improving access to business services, finance, infrastructure, markets, technology, education and skills while protecting livelihoods during the transition to formality (ILO, 2015). Zimbabwe's own policy discussions have similarly emphasised a coordinated and participatory approach to addressing decent-work deficits within the informal economy (ILO, 2023).

ii) *Skills Development*

Community-based skills development centres should support employment, entrepreneurship and economic participation. Training should respond to local economic needs, including construction, renewable energy, recycling, digital entrepreneurship and information and communication technologies. This approach is consistent with the ILO's emphasis on accessible education, lifelong learning, entrepreneurship and skills development as components of inclusive economic transformation (ILO, 2015). It also corresponds with Zimbabwe's broader efforts to strengthen the productive capacities and market readiness of youth- and women-led micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (UNDP Zimbabwe, 2024).

D. Leveraging Social Capital and Community Assets

i) *Community-Based Economic Cooperatives*

Policy interventions should support community-based cooperatives that transform existing social networks into productive economic systems. Cooperatives can facilitate access to finance, markets, skills and collective resources while strengthening participation and local economic activity. The ILO (2015) explicitly recognises cooperatives and other social and solidarity-economy organisations as economic units that should be incorporated into strategies for inclusive development and the transition from informality. More recent evidence from Zimbabwe also identifies cooperative approaches as potentially useful for improving working conditions and supporting informal workers, particularly women (ILO, 2024a).

ii) *Revitalising Heritage and Cultural Identity*

Epworth's historical and cultural identity should be recognised as a potential economic asset. Heritage tourism, cultural events, creative industries, oral-history projects and community museums can support local enterprise and strengthen community identity where developed through participatory and equitable arrangements. Zimbabwe's recent cultural-development initiatives demonstrate the potential for linking heritage, community participation, creative enterprise and local economic opportunities. UNESCO (2024a), for example, has supported approaches that connect cultural heritage and sustainable tourism with community-based economic activities, while UNESCO and the ILO have identified the cultural and creative sectors as an important area for improving livelihoods and transitioning informal cultural workers towards more sustainable forms of economic participation (ILO, 2024b; UNESCO, 2024b). Such interventions should ensure that local communities participate in determining how cultural resources are represented, managed and economically utilised.

E. Building a Participatory Development Culture

i) *Community Development Forums*

Regular and inclusive community development forums should create structured spaces where residents, local authorities, civil society organisations, traditional leaders and private-sector actors jointly identify priorities, monitor projects and address challenges. Participatory approaches are particularly relevant in informal settlements because local knowledge

can contribute to settlement profiling, planning, service prioritisation and tenure-related interventions (UN-Habitat, 2021, 2023). In addition, ILO Recommendation No. 204 emphasises consultation and active participation by organisations representing workers and economic units in the design, implementation and evaluation of policies affecting the informal economy (ILO, 2015).

ii) *Youth and Women's Participation Platforms*

Youth and women should be represented in local economic planning, entrepreneurship initiatives, cooperatives and community decision-making structures. The ILO (2015) calls for gender equality and non-discrimination to be integrated into strategies addressing informality and specifically identifies women and young people among groups requiring particular attention. In Zimbabwe, current development initiatives similarly identify women- and youth-led MSMEs as important participants in economic development and emphasise capacity building, market readiness and access to wider markets (UNDP Zimbabwe, 2024). Such platforms can therefore strengthen participation, skills development and access to economic opportunities while ensuring that local development processes reflect the priorities of groups that may otherwise have limited representation.

F. Integrating Historical Memory with Local Economic Development

Economic transformation in Epworth requires a development approach that recognises historical experiences and community identity as important foundations for sustainable progress. Development strategies should acknowledge local histories, address inequalities and strengthen institutions capable of connecting residents, government and economic actors. Historical analysis is also essential for understanding contemporary economic challenges, particularly because the development of Epworth has been shaped by changing land-management arrangements, settlement patterns, poverty and relationships between residents and local authorities (Musemwa, 2013).

Informality, unemployment, infrastructure limitations and restricted access to finance should therefore be understood in relation to wider historical processes involving urban planning, land governance and socioeconomic exclusion rather than as isolated contemporary problems (Bandauko & Chirisa, 2022; Musemwa, 2013). Research involving Epworth and other informal settlements in Harare shows that residents experience insecure housing conditions and limited urban opportunities while simultaneously developing strategies to sustain their livelihoods and improve their communities (Bandauko & Chirisa, 2022). Ultimately, Epworth's development should be understood as a process that connects historical awareness with practical economic action.

Community knowledge, social networks and local identity represent important assets, but historical identity should support inclusive participation rather than create exclusionary boundaries. Zimbabwe's contemporary heritage policy and programming emphasise the importance of safeguarding cultural identity, indigenous knowledge and community participation while also recognising the potential contribution of cultural and creative industries to sustainable livelihoods (UNESCO, 2023, 2024b). For Epworth, this implies that historical memory should be used to strengthen social inclusion, community ownership and economic participation rather than to reproduce divisions or unequal access to local resources.

VI. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework positions historical memory, institutional legitimacy and governance, community identity and social capital, participation and economic activity, and local economic development as the central constructs explaining local economic development in Epworth.

A. Conceptual Framework Diagram

HISTORICAL MEMORY

Past experiences, settlement history, institutional experiences and collective memory

↓

Shapes perceptions of development and institutions

↓

INSTITUTIONAL LEGITIMACY AND GOVERNANCE

Trust, transparency, accountability, responsiveness, coordination and clarity of roles

↓

PARTICIPATION AND ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

Community participation, entrepreneurship, informal economic activity, enterprise development and livelihood activities

↓

LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Employment, investment, enterprise development, improved livelihoods, infrastructure and economic opportunities

COMMUNITY IDENTITY AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Shared values, culture, place attachment, networks, trust, reciprocity and collective action

↘ Influences participation and economic activity

↗ Strengthens collective action and stakeholder collaboration

B. Explanation of the Proposed Framework

The framework integrates historical memory, institutional legitimacy and governance, community identity and social capital, participation and economic activity, and local economic development as interconnected dimensions of development in Epworth.

i) *Historical Memory*

Historical memory refers to collectively constructed interpretations of past political, economic, social and spatial experiences through which communities understand the present and possible futures (Olick & Robbins, 1998). In Epworth, settlement history, institutional experiences, land arrangements and struggles over recognition and development shape perceptions of contemporary development initiatives. The area's evolution from a Methodist mission settlement through post-independence administrative changes, land regularisation and informal settlement upgrading provides an important historical context for current development processes (Chitekwe-Biti et al., 2012). Historical institutionalism further suggests that earlier institutional arrangements can shape and constrain subsequent development trajectories (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010).

ii) *Institutional Legitimacy and Governance*

Institutional legitimacy concerns whether governance institutions are perceived as fair, transparent, accountable, responsive and trustworthy. Reliability, responsiveness, openness, fairness and integrity are important dimensions of institutional trust (OECD, 2024). Trust is therefore treated as an indicator of perceived institutional legitimacy, influencing cooperation, compliance and engagement with public programmes. Historical institutionalism provides the contextual basis for understanding how contemporary governance arrangements emerge through continuity, gradual change and contestation (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010).

iii) *Community Identity and Social Capital*

Community identity encompasses shared values, cultural heritage, social relationships, norms and attachment to place. Social capital refers to relationships, trust, reciprocity and networks that facilitate collective action and resource exchange (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Place attachment and social capital can reinforce community participation (Binder et al., 2023; İnal-Çekiç et al., 2024). However, strong internal networks may also produce exclusion where opportunities and information remain concentrated among particular groups, an important consideration in heterogeneous settlements such as Epworth (Chirisa & Muhomba, 2013).

iv) *Participation and Economic Activity*

Participation and economic activity encompass involvement in community decision-making, collective initiatives, entrepreneurship, informal enterprises and employment-related activities. Participation enables residents to contribute local knowledge and influence development priorities, although outcomes depend on inclusion, accountability, institutional capacity and local power relations (Mansuri & Rao, 2013; World Bank, 2023). In Epworth, community participation has contributed to settlement profiling, enumeration, planning and identification of development priorities (Chitekwe-Biti et al., 2012).

v) *Local Economic Development*

Local economic development is the principal outcome and includes employment, investment, enterprise development, livelihoods, productivity, economic opportunities and productive infrastructure (OECD, 2024; World Bank, 2023). The study conceptualises it as resulting from interactions among historical memory, institutional legitimacy, community identity, social capital, participation and economic activity. Historical experiences may shape institutional perceptions; legitimacy may influence participation; social networks may facilitate or constrain collective action; and participation may connect residents to economic opportunities.

C. Theoretical Integration

The framework integrates historical institutionalism, institutional economics, social capital theory and participatory development theory. Historical institutionalism explains how past institutional arrangements shape contemporary trajectories (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). Institutional economics highlights how rules, institutions and property arrangements structure incentives and reduce uncertainty (North, 1990). Social capital theory explains how networks, reciprocity and shared norms facilitate or constrain collective action (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Participatory development theory explains how inclusive decision-making incorporates local knowledge and connects interventions with community priorities, while recognising the importance of power, inclusion and institutional capacity (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Together, these perspectives connect

historical experience, institutional conditions, community relationships and participation to local economic development in Epworth.

D. Proposed Conceptual Relationships and Hypotheses

- **H1:** Institutional legitimacy and governance positively influence participation and economic activity.
- **H2:** Historical memory significantly shapes community perceptions of development interventions and institutional legitimacy.
- **H3:** Community identity and social capital positively influence participation and economic activity.
- **H4:** Participation and economic activity positively influence local economic development.
- **H5:** Institutional legitimacy and governance positively influence local economic development through participation and economic activity.

These hypotheses correspond directly with the five constructs and should be used consistently in the methodology, questionnaire, statistical analysis, findings and discussion.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that local economic development in Epworth cannot be understood solely through conventional indicators such as infrastructure investment, employment creation or enterprise expansion. Development is embedded within historical trajectories, institutional arrangements, community identities and patterns of participation that shape how development interventions are perceived and implemented. The findings demonstrate that historical memory influences perceptions of belonging and development legitimacy; institutional legitimacy and governance affect confidence, coordination and investment conditions; community identity and social capital shape collective action and participation; and participation and economic activity provide important mechanisms through which residents engage with local economic development. Consequently, sustainable development in Epworth requires an integrated framework combining institutional reform, participatory governance, tenure security, infrastructure development, informal-sector support, entrepreneurship promotion and recognition of heritage-based assets. The study therefore advances a historically informed, community-centred and place-based approach to local economic development in which residents are recognised as holders of knowledge, identity, social capital and economic potential.

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