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Citizen Participation, Regional Economic Adjustment and Prospects for Inclusive Growth in Murewa District, Mashonaland East Province, Zimbabwe

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Abstract: *Regional economic adjustment in rural Zimbabwe is shaped by historical disruption, agricultural dependence, infrastructure deficits, demographic change and uneven access to markets and services. Drawing on regional development and inclusive-growth perspectives, this study examines how Murewa District can convert its productive and locational advantages into broad-based development. A pragmatic mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating quantitative evidence from household and stakeholder surveys with qualitative evidence from interviews to assess livelihoods, infrastructure, employment, institutional capacity and economic opportunities. Findings indicate that adjustment is occurring primarily through agricultural diversification, horticulture, informal enterprise and other livelihood strategies rather than deep structural transformation. Murewa's proximity to Harare creates substantial market opportunities, but inadequate irrigation, unreliable electricity, weak feeder roads, limited finance and constrained institutional capacity restrict value addition and productive employment. Devolution has improved local accessibility, although resource and implementation constraints remain. The evidence suggests that inclusive growth is conditional rather than automatic: agricultural and metropolitan advantages generate limited developmental gains unless supported by resilient infrastructure, agro-processing, enterprise finance, skills and capable local institutions. Murewa's prospects depend on shifting from coping-oriented adjustment towards coordinated structural transformation that links agriculture, value chains, employment, infrastructure, climate resilience and participatory local governance. The study contributes a district-level perspective on how historical vulnerabilities can be transformed into more inclusive and resilient regional development.*

Keywords: *Regional Economic Adjustment, Inclusive Growth, Murewa District, Agricultural Diversification, Structural Transformation, Infrastructure, Devolution, Rural Development*

I. INTRODUCTION

Regional economic adjustment has become an important development concern in Zimbabwe as rural districts confront macroeconomic instability, recurrent climatic shocks, demographic change, infrastructure deficits, limited productive employment and unequal access to markets and public services (IFC, 2024; World Bank, 2025, 2026). Zimbabwe's poverty reduction remains constrained by macroeconomic volatility, dependence on low-productivity agriculture, exposure to weather shocks and limited social protection, while economic recovery remains vulnerable to climatic and structural shocks (World Bank, 2025, 2026). These challenges are particularly significant for rural economies whose livelihoods depend heavily on climate-sensitive agriculture and whose diversification into higher-productivity activities is constrained by inadequate infrastructure, limited finance and weak market linkages (IFC, 2024; World Bank, 2025). Against this background, Murewa District in Mashonaland East Province provides an important case for examining the relationship between regional economic adjustment and inclusive growth.

Murewa is predominantly agrarian, with agriculture, horticulture and livestock forming the core of economic activity, while wholesale, retail and services provide complementary livelihoods (MRDC, 2022; GoZ, 2020, 2025). MRDC reports that horticulture, crop production and animal husbandry account for more than 55% of economic activities, while manufacturing and value addition remain at an early stage. Located approximately 86 kilometres north-east of Harare along the Harare–Nyamapanda road, Murewa has potential advantages arising from access to metropolitan markets and transport networks (MRDC, 2022; GoZ, 2020, 2025). Zimbabwe's agribusiness sector similarly has considerable potential in horticulture, livestock and related value chains, although finance, macroeconomic instability, energy constraints and transport

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infrastructure remain significant barriers to private-sector development (IFC, 2024). Murewa's prospects therefore depend not only on increasing agricultural production but also on transforming its locational and productive advantages into diversified value chains, agro-processing, investment, employment and sustainable livelihoods (IFC, 2024; World Bank, 2025). These priorities are consistent with Zimbabwe's development framework, which emphasises productive investment, infrastructure, value addition, enterprise development and inclusive economic opportunities (GoZ, 2020, 2025).

Murewa's current economic circumstances should also be understood within its historical experience of conflict and disruption. During Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, the district formed part of the north-eastern operational theatre of the Second Chimurenga and experienced ZANLA mobilisation, recruitment and military activity between 1972 and 1980 (Sibanda, 2005; Chenzi, 2011; Munyoro et al., 2021). Historical research documents extensive ZANLA recruitment and mobilisation in Murewa during this period (Chenzi, 2011; Munyoro et al., 2021). Although current underdevelopment should not be attributed directly to the liberation war, historical disruption forms part of the broader institutional and infrastructural conditions from which subsequent development trajectories emerged. Research on post-conflict economies shows that conflict can disrupt markets, infrastructure, productive assets, livelihoods and institutions, potentially complicating later economic recovery (World Bank, 2011). Murewa's development trajectory can therefore be viewed as cumulative, with historical disruption interacting with infrastructure deficiencies, institutional constraints, demographic pressures and changing livelihood strategies (Sibanda, 2005; Chenzi, 2011; Munyoro et al., 2021). Infrastructure rehabilitation and public-service investment consequently remain important foundations for productive and inclusive regional development.

Demographic growth and Murewa's increasingly close relationship with Harare provide another important dimension of regional adjustment. Zimbabwe's population increased from 13,061,239 in 2012 to 15,178,957 in 2022, representing an inter-censal annual growth rate of approximately 1.5% (ZIMSTAT, 2023). MRDC reports a 2022 population of 205,432 for its council area. Population growth and metropolitan proximity create opportunities for agricultural market integration, commuting, retail expansion, investment and the circulation of skills, information and capital. Harare's large consumer market is particularly relevant to producers in surrounding rural districts, while stronger rural–urban linkages can facilitate market access and economic diversification when transport, infrastructure and productive capacity are adequate (IFC, 2024). However, metropolitan proximity can also create pressures where local productive capacity and infrastructure fail to expand sufficiently. Murewa therefore faces a regional-development paradox: proximity to Harare enhances market opportunities while simultaneously exposing the district to uneven spatial development.

The socioeconomic environment also includes local security conditions that may influence business confidence and livelihoods. For example, the Zimbabwe Republic Police reported that armed robbery suspects attacked a business owner at Nyamuzara Business Centre in Murewa in April 2025 (ZRP, 2025). Such an incident should not be interpreted as evidence that poverty or unemployment directly causes crime; rather, insecurity represents one component of the socioeconomic environment that may influence perceptions of safety, investment confidence and local market activity (World Bank, 2011). Economic adjustment consequently requires not only physical infrastructure and market access but also an enabling institutional environment that supports enterprise development, investment and secure economic activity (World Bank, 2011; IFC, 2024).

Within this context, regional economic adjustment refers to the process through which a rural economy restructures its productive base, institutions and spatial linkages in response to historical disruptions and contemporary economic pressures (World Bank, 2009, 2011). The central issue is therefore not simply whether Murewa can achieve economic growth, but whether such growth can generate decent employment, increase household incomes, reduce spatial and socioeconomic inequalities, strengthen small enterprises and improve access to infrastructure and public services (ILO, 2024; World Bank, 2026). This distinction is important because aggregate economic expansion does not automatically produce inclusive development. Zimbabwe's recent economic evidence demonstrates that poverty remains sensitive to inflation, weather shocks and limited productive employment, particularly among rural households dependent on rain-fed agriculture (World Bank, 2025, 2026). The importance of inclusive growth is also recognised in the National Development Strategy 2 (NDS2), which seeks broader distribution of the benefits of economic growth (GoZ, 2025).

Murewa has several potential pathways for economic adjustment, including smallholder agricultural commercialisation, horticultural value-chain development, irrigation, agro-processing, mining-related enterprises, tourism, renewable energy, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and stronger linkages with Harare (MRDC, 2022; IFC, 2024). MRDC identifies sustainable tourism, precious-mineral mining, gravity-fed irrigation, micro-hydroelectricity, agro-processing and value addition, and solar and wind-energy projects as investment opportunities (MRDC, 2022). These opportunities correspond with national and private-sector assessments identifying agribusiness, mining and tourism as sectors with potential to generate growth and employment (MRDC, 2022; IFC, 2024).

However, productive potential alone does not guarantee inclusive growth. Weak storage, processing, energy and marketing infrastructure can limit the ability of small producers to capture value, while restricted finance and macroeconomic uncertainty can constrain investment (IFC, 2024).Climate resilience is particularly important because agriculture remains central to Murewa's economy. Zimbabwe's 2023/24 El Niño drought caused severe agricultural losses, while the World Bank reports substantial reductions in maize yields and significant economic costs associated with the drought (World Bank, 2025). The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) similarly emphasised irrigation, water management, livestock support and climate-resilient agrifood systems in response to the crisis (FAO, 2024). Regional economic adjustment in Murewa therefore cannot be separated from climate adaptation. Investment in irrigation, water infrastructure, renewable energy, resilient roads, storage and agro-processing can simultaneously reduce vulnerability and strengthen productive capacity (FAO, 2024; World Bank, 2025). National development priorities likewise emphasise infrastructure, private-sector investment, value addition, market access and climate resilience as foundations for sustainable and inclusive growth (World Bank, 2025; GoZ, 2025).

The critical question is whether Murewa can transform its historical vulnerabilities, agricultural capabilities, demographic dynamics and proximity to Harare into a more diversified, resilient and inclusive regional economy. Examining Regional Economic Adjustment and Prospects for Inclusive Growth in Murewa District, Zimbabwe is therefore important because it moves beyond conventional measures of rural economic performance to examine how local economies adapt to structural constraints and generate new opportunities. Murewa should not be viewed simply as a disadvantaged rural district but as a dynamically connected economy within the wider Harare–Mashonaland East regional system. Its agrarian base, demographic scale, metropolitan connections and investment potential create opportunities for deeper integration into regional value chains, while infrastructure, finance, climate vulnerability and institutional capacity remain important constraints. The study consequently focuses on whether economic adjustment can promote productive diversification, employment creation, stronger local value capture, improved infrastructure and more equitable access to economic opportunities. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates on how rural regions in Zimbabwe can achieve development that is productive, spatially balanced, climate-resilient and socially inclusive, while providing locally grounded evidence for translating national development aspirations into tangible regional outcomes.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Conceptualising Regional Economic Adjustment and Inclusive Growth

Regional economic adjustment refers to how territories respond to structural change, economic shocks, institutional constraints and changing market opportunities by reallocating resources, diversifying production and strengthening productive and institutional capacities (OECD, 2023). Adjustment is spatial because infrastructure, skills, markets, finance, productivity and public services are unevenly distributed across regions. Place-based investment and diversification can therefore strengthen the capacity of less productive regions to improve their competitiveness and resilience (OECD, 2023; World Bank, 2025). In Murewa, regional adjustment involves how households, farms, enterprises and institutions respond to agricultural shocks, infrastructure constraints, demographic pressures and changing linkages with Harare. It therefore extends beyond recovery to structural diversification and productivity enhancement (OECD, 2023; World Bank, 2025). Inclusive growth complements this perspective by focusing on broad-based participation in employment, productivity, income opportunities, infrastructure, services and human capabilities. Economic growth does not automatically produce inclusive outcomes where disadvantaged groups lack access to skills, finance, infrastructure and employment (OECD, 2023). Zimbabwe's NDS1 and NDS2 similarly emphasise inclusive economic transformation, infrastructure development, agricultural productivity, value addition, job creation and equitable development through devolution (GoZ, 2020, 2025). Murewa should therefore be viewed as a regional economy shaped by interactions among productive capacity, institutions, infrastructure, markets and public policy.

B. Agricultural Economy, Livelihood Diversification and Regional Adjustment

Agriculture remains central to Murewa's economy, although rural livelihoods extend beyond crop production. Pasipangodya and Mwenye (2020), examining four wards in Murewa District, found substantial livelihood diversification involving crop production, casual labour, market gardening, brick moulding, arts and crafts and other non-farm activities. This suggests that households use multiple economic activities to manage seasonal and economic uncertainty. Regional adjustment should therefore be understood as a livelihood portfolio process rather than agricultural production alone. Climate variability further increases rural vulnerability. Zimbabwe's dependence on rain-fed agriculture exposes rural households to drought and rainfall variability (World Bank, 2025). The 2023/24 El Niño drought significantly affected agricultural production and livelihoods, demonstrating the limitations of recovery strategies that depend solely on favourable climatic conditions (FAO, 2024; World Bank, 2025). In Murewa, adjustment therefore requires irrigation, climate-smart agriculture, horticulture, livestock, storage, agro-processing and value addition. FAO (2025a, 2025b) highlights climate-smart irrigation, solar-powered irrigation, digital technologies and improved market linkages as opportunities for

strengthening agricultural resilience. Such transformation can connect agricultural production to employment, higher incomes and stronger local value chains, consistent with NDS2's emphasis on agricultural modernisation, value addition and job creation (GoZ, 2025).

C. Poverty, Inequality and Inclusive Local Growth

Inclusive growth in Murewa must be understood within Zimbabwe's persistent spatial and socioeconomic inequalities. ZIMSTAT's poverty-mapping programme demonstrates the value of district- and ward-level analysis because poverty and living conditions vary considerably between territories (ZIMSTAT, 2021). However, the 2021 Poverty Atlas is based on 2017 PICES data and therefore reflects conditions associated with that reference period rather than continuously updated local poverty levels. Recent evidence shows that rural households remain vulnerable despite periods of economic recovery. The World Bank (2025, 2026) identifies dependence on rain-fed agriculture, limited off-farm employment, inadequate social protection and unequal access to economic opportunities as continuing constraints on poverty reduction. Consequently, inclusive growth in Murewa should be assessed through employment, household income, livelihood security, entrepreneurship, infrastructure access, financial inclusion and participation by women and young people. The key issue is not merely increasing production but ensuring equitable access to productive opportunities.

D. Infrastructure, Connectivity and Economic Adjustment

Infrastructure is a fundamental condition for regional economic adjustment because roads, electricity, water, irrigation, telecommunications, storage and markets influence the ability of producers and enterprises to participate in wider economic systems (OECD, 2023; World Bank, 2025). Although Murewa's proximity to Harare provides access to a large urban market, poor feeder roads, unreliable electricity, inadequate storage and weak digital connectivity can increase transaction costs and limit participation in higher-value markets (World Bank, 2025a, 2025b). Geographic proximity therefore produces economic benefits only when supported by effective physical, digital and institutional connectivity (World Bank, 2025a; World Bank, 2024). Irrigation, electricity and digital infrastructure are particularly important under increasing climate variability (World Bank, 2025b; World Bank, 2024). Irrigation can reduce dependence on rainfall, electricity supports processing and storage, while digital connectivity can improve access to information, markets and financial services (World Bank, 2023, 2025a; World Bank Group, 2024). Rural connectivity gaps and electricity constraints continue to limit digital entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe (World Bank, 2021). NDS2 places infrastructure and digital transformation within the broader development agenda (GoZ, 2025). Infrastructure should therefore be treated as productive capital that can enhance Murewa's agricultural competitiveness, value addition and regional integration.

E. Devolution, Local Economic Development and Institutional Capacity

Zimbabwe's devolution framework provides an institutional basis for regional adjustment and local economic development. Section 264 of the Constitution provides for devolution of governmental powers and responsibilities to provincial, metropolitan and local authorities, with objectives including public participation, accountable governance, community development and equitable resource sharing (Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No. 20) Act, 2013). NDS1 and NDS2 further identify devolution and decentralisation as mechanisms for promoting subnational development, investment and inclusivity (GoZ, 2020, 2025).However, decentralisation does not automatically produce effective local development. Its outcomes depend on political, institutional, financial and legislative arrangements, accountability, intergovernmental relations and capacity building (Chagwedera et al., 2023; Chakunda & Matenga, 2024). For Murewa, effective adjustment requires institutions capable of identifying local economic opportunities, coordinating stakeholders, mobilising resources and facilitating community participation. Devolution should therefore be assessed through fiscal capacity, technical expertise, institutional coordination, accountability and the ability to translate development plans into productive investments (OECD, 2023).

F. Climate Resilience, Structural Transformation and Inclusive Growth

Climate resilience and structural transformation are closely connected dimensions of rural development. The 2023/24 El Niño drought caused approximately US$363 million in damage and losses and reduced GDP by an estimated 3.2% relative to a no-drought scenario (World Bank, 2025). These effects demonstrate the vulnerability of rural economies dependent on rain-fed agriculture, particularly as increasingly frequent and severe droughts expose smallholder households to production losses, income instability and food insecurity (Chigumira et al., 2025; World Bank, 2025). Resilience therefore requires adaptation, productive infrastructure, diversified livelihoods and anticipatory capacity rather than simply restoring production after shocks (Chigumira et al., 2025; FAO, 2025). For Murewa, structural transformation should involve greater diversification into agro-processing, horticulture, logistics, SMEs, renewable energy and digital services, supported by improved infrastructure, investment and market access (World Bank, 2024, 2025). Such activities can increase local value addition, create employment, strengthen household incomes and reduce exposure to agricultural and climate-related shocks (World Bank, 2021, 2025). Rural–urban linkages are also important. Scoones and Murimbarimba (2021) show that changes

in Zimbabwe's agrarian economy are connected to transformations in small towns, transport networks, migration and informal economic activity. Murewa's proximity to Harare therefore offers opportunities for agricultural supply chains, horticulture, agro-processing, logistics and enterprise development. Regional adjustment should consequently be understood as a process of diversification, productivity enhancement, resilience and rural–urban integration that creates more inclusive pathways for employment, income generation and local economic growth.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Philosophy and Approach

The study adopted a pragmatic research philosophy because examining regional economic adjustment and inclusive growth required both measurable evidence and contextual explanations of how households, businesses and institutions experienced economic change (Saunders et al., 2023). Pragmatism is suitable for mixed-methods research because it prioritises research questions and practical usefulness rather than commitment to a single epistemological position (Hampson & McKinley, 2023). Accordingly, a mixed-methods approach was adopted. Quantitative evidence measured patterns in livelihoods, employment, enterprise participation, market access, infrastructure and perceptions of economic opportunities, while qualitative evidence explained the institutional, social and historical processes underlying these patterns (Saunders et al., 2023; Younas et al., 2023).

B. Research Design

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed (Younas et al., 2023). Quantitative and qualitative data were collected during approximately the same period and analysed separately before being integrated during interpretation. This design enabled statistical patterns to be compared with stakeholder experiences and institutional perspectives, facilitating the identification of convergence, complementarity and divergence (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Younas et al., 2023). It was appropriate because the study sought to establish both the extent of economic adjustment and the factors explaining inclusive or exclusionary outcomes.

C. Study Area

The study was conducted in Murewa District, Mashonaland East Province, Zimbabwe. Murewa was purposively selected because its predominantly rural economy, agricultural livelihoods, emerging enterprises, local markets and proximity to Harare provide an appropriate setting for examining regional economic adjustment and inclusive growth. The district is integrated into wider economic systems through agricultural production, urban markets, employment, migration and service centres. The study was also aligned with Zimbabwe's development priorities, particularly NDS1, which emphasises economic transformation, employment creation, enterprise development, infrastructure and inclusive growth (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). The 2022 Population and Housing Census provided official demographic and socioeconomic information for understanding spatial characteristics within the district (ZIMSTAT, 2023). Murewa was further considered a regional economic system in which agriculture, infrastructure, employment, entrepreneurship and public services interact. This was particularly relevant following the severe 2023/24 El Niño drought, which adversely affected agricultural production and rural livelihoods in Zimbabwe (World Bank, 2025).

D. Target Population and Sampling

The target population comprised households, farmers, SMEs, local authority officials, government departments, community leaders, development organisations and other economic stakeholders in Murewa District. Stratified random sampling was used for households to enhance representation across different communities and settlement contexts, while purposive sampling identified key informants with specialised knowledge of agriculture, enterprise development, infrastructure, governance and local economic development (Saunders et al., 2023). The sample size was determined using an appropriate statistical procedure based on the accessible population, confidence level and acceptable sampling error (Taherdoost, 2017; Lakens, 2022). Combining probability and purposive sampling enabled the study to capture both measurable household patterns and detailed institutional and sector-specific perspectives (Saunders et al., 2023; Aramide et al., 2023).

E. Data Collection Methods

Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and field observations, while documentary analysis provided complementary secondary evidence. Questionnaires generated quantitative information on livelihoods, employment, agricultural production, enterprise participation, finance, markets, infrastructure, public services and perceptions of inclusive opportunities (Braun et al., 2023). Interviews with officials, farmers, business representatives, community leaders and development practitioners provided contextual explanations of economic adjustment and institutional constraints. Documentary analysis examined census reports, policy documents, district development plans and national development strategies (Saunders et al., 2023). Using multiple methods enhanced triangulation and allowed

economic conditions to be examined from household, institutional and policy perspectives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Aramide et al., 2023).

F. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were coded and analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations summarised socioeconomic characteristics and perceptions, while cross-tabulations and appropriate statistical tests examined relationships among livelihoods, employment, infrastructure and enterprise participation. Regression analysis was applied where assumptions were satisfied to identify factors associated with economic opportunities (Hair et al., 2019). Qualitative data were transcribed, coded and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, involving familiarisation, coding, theme development, review and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Quantitative and qualitative findings were subsequently integrated by comparing areas of convergence, complementarity and contradiction, thereby producing broader explanations of economic adjustment in Murewa (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

G. Validity, Reliability and Trustworthiness

Research quality was enhanced through expert review, pilot testing, reliability assessment and triangulation. Questionnaire items were developed from the research objectives and literature and reviewed for content validity (Hočevar et al., 2024; Witry et al., 2023). A pilot study identified ambiguous wording and weaknesses in the instruments before the main survey (Hočevar et al., 2024; Witry et al., 2023). Internal consistency of multi-item scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with approximately .70 or above regarded as acceptable while recognising that reliability also depends on scale characteristics and purpose (Taber, 2018). Qualitative trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation, systematic documentation, member checking where appropriate and an audit trail addressing credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017).

H. Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout the research. Participants received adequate information about the purpose, procedures and voluntary nature of the study, including their right to decline participation or withdraw at any stage without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, consistent with the principles of respect for persons, autonomy and voluntary participation (CIOMS, 2016; WMA, 2024). Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by excluding personal identifiers from the analytical dataset and reporting findings in a manner that prevented individual participants from being identified. Appropriate measures were also taken to protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants' information (WMA, 2024). Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the relevant institutional and local authorities before fieldwork commenced. Throughout the research process, coercion, undue influence, deception and misrepresentation were avoided, thereby ensuring that participation was based on free and informed choice (NCPHSBBR, 1979; CIOMS, 2016). These measures were intended to protect participants' dignity, rights, welfare and autonomy and to ensure that the research was conducted in accordance with recognised ethical standards.

I. Methodological Rationale

Overall, the methodology enabled the study to examine not only whether Murewa experienced economic change but also who benefited, through which mechanisms and under what socioeconomic, spatial and institutional conditions. Integrating household-level quantitative evidence with stakeholder narratives, observations and documentary analysis provided a comprehensive assessment of livelihoods, agriculture, enterprise development, infrastructure, employment and institutional capacity. The methodology therefore provided an evidence-based foundation for identifying strategies that can promote inclusive, resilient and locally appropriate economic development in Murewa District.

IV. FINDINGS

A. Agricultural Adjustment and Livelihood Diversification

The findings indicate that agriculture remains the dominant foundation of livelihoods in Murewa, although households increasingly combine crop production with horticulture, petty trading, casual employment, livestock production and small-scale enterprises. Approximately 72% of respondents identified crop production as their principal livelihood, while 61% reported undertaking at least one non-farm activity to supplement agricultural income. Horticulture and market gardening were particularly significant because of Murewa’s proximity to Harare and access to urban markets. However, only 38% reported having reliable irrigation, demonstrating continued vulnerability to rainfall variability and drought. This finding is consistent with evidence that Zimbabwe’s rural economy remains heavily dependent on smallholder, rain-fed agriculture, making household incomes and food security particularly vulnerable to climate variability and shocks (Muoni et al., 2025). The 2023/24 El Niño-induced drought demonstrated this vulnerability through severe reductions in agricultural production, damage to rural livelihoods and broader economic losses, with the drought contributing to an estimated US$363 million in damage and losses and a projected 3.2% decline in GDP (World Bank, 2025).

Qualitative interviews reinforced the importance of diversification. One farmer stated, "We cannot depend on maize alone; when the rains fail, we sell vegetables, chickens or do casual work to survive."

Another explained, "Harare gives us a market, but we need irrigation, storage and transport to benefit fully."

These findings suggest that diversification is an important household adjustment strategy, but it currently functions more as a coping and risk-management mechanism than as evidence of deep structural transformation. Recent evidence from rural Zimbabwe shows that households diversify their livelihoods in response to climatic and economic pressures, but socioeconomic and financial constraints limit their ability to develop diversification into more productive and sustainable livelihood portfolios (Nyathi, 2025).

B. Infrastructure, Market Access and Local Economic Transformation

Infrastructure emerged as both an important opportunity and a major constraint to economic adjustment. Approximately 67% of respondents regarded connectivity to Harare and major markets as an important economic advantage, while 64% identified poor feeder roads, unreliable electricity and inadequate water infrastructure as significant barriers to enterprise development. Murewa's geographical proximity to Harare provides a potentially strong comparative advantage, but inadequate infrastructure increases transaction costs and limits producers' ability to access higher-value markets (World Bank, 2024; Munyati et al., 2025).

One trader explained, "The market is there in Harare, but sometimes the road and transport costs take away most of the profit."

Similarly, a local enterprise operator observed, "If electricity was reliable, we could process more agricultural products instead of selling everything in raw form."

These accounts demonstrate that infrastructure directly influences the profitability, productivity and competitiveness of rural economic activities (AfDB, 2024; World Bank, 2025). Reliable electricity is particularly important for irrigation, refrigeration, processing, packaging and storage, while efficient road and transport networks facilitate the movement of agricultural products to consumers and processors, reducing transaction costs and post-harvest losses (FAO, 2024). Consequently, infrastructure should be viewed as productive economic capital rather than merely as a social-service investment (AfDB, 2024; GoZ, 2026). Murewa's proximity to Harare can become a genuine economic advantage only when supported by reliable roads, electricity, water, storage, transport and digital connectivity capable of linking local producers to urban markets and value chains (GoZ, 2026; World Bank, 2025).

C. Employment, Poverty and Inclusive Growth

Employment insecurity remains a major obstacle to inclusive growth. The findings show that 69% of respondents considered formal employment opportunities inadequate, while 63% identified youth unemployment as a major development concern. Approximately 58% reported depending partly on informal activities such as petty trading, casual labour, transport services, construction and small-scale agricultural enterprises. These patterns demonstrate that economic adjustment has largely occurred through informal livelihood strategies rather than substantial formal-sector job creation (ZIMSTAT, 2025; World Bank, 2022).

One youth participant stated, "There are opportunities to work, but most are temporary; young people need businesses that can employ others."

Another explained, "When there is no income, people survive through small trading and farming."

Although informal activities provide an important livelihood buffer, they often involve insecure incomes, limited access to finance and weak opportunities for expansion (World Bank, 2023; ILO, 2024). The findings therefore indicate that inclusive growth should not be measured simply by increases in local production but also by the creation of decent employment, income security and sustainable enterprises (ILO, 2024; AfDB, 2024). Transforming informal activities into productive businesses requires improved access to finance, skills, technology, infrastructure, business development services and formal markets (IFC, 2024; AfDB, 2024). Such interventions could enable livelihood diversification to move from survival-oriented coping towards productive economic transformation, particularly for youth and women (World Bank, 2024; ILO, 2024).

D. Institutional Capacity, Devolution and Community Participation

The findings reveal mixed perceptions regarding the contribution of decentralisation and local governance to local economic development. Approximately 56% of respondents perceived local government structures as more accessible than central government institutions, while only 42% considered local authorities sufficiently resourced to implement major

development projects. Qualitative evidence indicates that communities recognise the potential of devolution but remain concerned about limited financial resources, bureaucratic procedures and weak institutional coordination.

One community leader stated, “Decisions are now closer to the people, but resources have not always followed the responsibilities.”

A local business participant similarly noted, “Council can identify projects, but implementation is slow when funding is unavailable.”

These findings highlight the tension between transferring responsibilities to local institutions and providing them with adequate financial, technical and administrative capacity (Mabiza et al., 2025; OAGZ, 2025). Recent evidence shows that although intergovernmental fiscal transfers have supported local infrastructure development, weaknesses in financial management, institutional capacity, accountability and service-delivery systems continue to constrain the ability of local authorities to convert transferred resources and responsibilities into effective development outcomes (Mabiza et al., 2025; OAGZ, 2025). Decentralisation therefore cannot be assessed solely by whether decision-making has moved closer to communities. Its effectiveness also depends on whether local authorities can translate decisions into tangible development outcomes (Gwiza & Jarbandhan, 2025; Marumahoko et al., 2025). In Murewa, stronger local institutions and meaningful community participation could improve the identification and implementation of investments in irrigation, roads, markets, energy and agro-processing. This is consistent with Zimbabwe’s devolution framework, which seeks to strengthen subnational institutions and enable local authorities to use fiscal resources to promote economic and social development within their jurisdictions (GoZ, 2020; MLGPW, 2025). Thus, Effective decentralisation consequently requires predictable fiscal transfers, improved local revenue mobilisation, technical expertise, transparent procurement, institutional coordination and citizen participation (Mabiza et al., 2025; Makiva & Tashu, 2025; OAGZ, 2025). Recent research further indicates that weak intergovernmental cooperation, inadequate local accountability and continued central influence over local-government functions can undermine the autonomy and effectiveness of devolved institutions (Makiva & Tashu, 2025; Marumahoko et al., 2025).

E. Prospects for Inclusive and Sustainable Regional Growth

Despite existing constraints, the findings indicate substantial opportunities for inclusive and sustainable growth. Approximately 74% of respondents identified horticulture and agro-processing as having strong growth potential, while 62% identified small and medium enterprises, 55% renewable energy and 48% tourism-related activities as promising areas. Stakeholders strongly emphasised value addition and stronger connections with Harare.

One participant argued, “Murewa should stop exporting raw products and start processing them locally.”

Another stated, “Our closeness to Harare can become an advantage if local businesses are connected to bigger markets.”

Horticulture and agro-processing are particularly promising because they can generate linkages among farmers, transporters, traders, processors, retailers and urban consumers, thereby strengthening agricultural value chains and increasing opportunities for local value addition (World Bank, 2024; FAO, 2025). Zimbabwe has considerable potential in agriculture and agribusiness value chains, while recent efforts to strengthen market-driven horticultural value chains emphasise infrastructure development, standards, climate-smart production and stronger connections between producers and markets (World Bank, 2024; FAO, 2025). Renewable energy could support irrigation, cold storage and agro-processing while reducing the effects of unreliable electricity supplies, which continue to constrain agricultural production, irrigation, cold-chain systems and storage in Zimbabwe (World Bank, 2024a). However, these opportunities require sustained investment in infrastructure, affordable finance, skills, appropriate technologies and effective institutional coordination (World Bank, 2024; World Bank, 2025; FAO, 2026). Recent evidence indicates that Zimbabwe's private-sector development is constrained by low investment, regulatory and institutional bottlenecks, limited access to finance and infrastructure deficits, while agro-processing and agriculture have been identified as priority sectors for private-sector-led economic transformation (World Bank, 2024; World Bank, 2025). Accordingly, without such support, Murewa risks remaining primarily a supplier of low-value raw agricultural products to Harare rather than developing into a diversified rural production and processing centre. Strengthening local value addition, therefore, requires coordinated investment in productive infrastructure, energy, finance, technology, skills and market institutions so that the district can capture a greater share of the value generated within its agricultural and horticultural production systems.

F. Critical Synthesis of the Findings

Collectively, the findings demonstrate that Murewa is adjusting primarily through household resilience and informal diversification rather than deep structural transformation. This distinction is important because national economic recovery

does not automatically translate into inclusive district-level development, particularly where rural economies remain agriculture-dependent and productive off-farm employment is limited (World Bank, 2025a; AfDB, 2026a). Although Zimbabwe's economy recovered strongly in 2025, with real GDP growth estimated at 7.5–7.6%, rural households remain vulnerable to climate shocks, informality and limited productive employment opportunities (AfDB, 2026a; World Bank, 2026). In Murewa, inadequate irrigation, electricity, roads, finance and formal employment constrain the transformative potential of livelihood diversification. Nevertheless, Murewa has substantial potential for inclusive growth through horticulture, agro-processing, SMEs, renewable energy and agricultural value chains. Realising this potential requires coordinated investment in climate-resilient irrigation, reliable electricity, roads, storage, affordable finance, skills, market linkages and capable local institutions (AfDB, 2025; FAO, 2026a; World Bank, 2025b). Strengthening agro-processing and post-harvest infrastructure could enable rural producers to retain more value and increase incomes (FAO, 2026b).

The central challenge is therefore to move from coping to transformation: from raw-product sales to value addition, precarious informal activities to productive enterprises, rain-dependent farming to climate-smart agriculture, and nominal decentralisation to adequately resourced and accountable local development. Effective decentralisation requires institutional capacity, citizen participation, service-delivery capability and sufficient resources (UNDP, 2026). Thus, Murewa's development prospects are substantial but conditional. Coordinated investment and institutional reform could foster a more diversified, resilient and inclusive economy, while persistent structural constraints may reproduce existing inequalities and vulnerabilities (GoZ, 2025; World Bank, 2025a; AfDB, 2026a).

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Strengthening Agricultural Productivity, Irrigation and Value Addition

The Government of Zimbabwe, Murewa Rural District Council and development partners should promote climate-resilient agriculture through irrigation, water harvesting, drought-tolerant seeds, extension services, mechanisation and improved storage (World Bank, 2025a; AfDB, 2025). Irrigation should support horticulture, contract farming and agro-processing, enabling farmers to access higher-value markets. Investment in aggregation centres, cold-chain facilities and farmer-market linkages can reduce post-harvest losses and improve incomes (FAO, 2026). These interventions should also strengthen employment in transport, processing, packaging, storage and marketing, fostering an integrated and resilient local agrifood economy in Murewa.

B. Developing Agro-Processing, SMEs and Local Value Chains

Murewa should progressively shift from primary agricultural production towards agro-processing, SMEs and local value addition. Support should target enterprises processing vegetables, fruits, maize and livestock products while providing business-development services in accounting, marketing, digital commerce, quality standards and entrepreneurship (GoZ, 2025; FAO, 2026; World Bank, 2026). Reducing regulatory costs and simplifying business procedures would encourage private-sector investment and enterprise growth (World Bank, 2025b). Support should particularly include women, youth, smallholder farmers and viable informal businesses seeking formalisation, since registration costs and regulatory burdens remain important barriers to formalisation in Zimbabwe (World Bank, 2023). A district value-chain strategy should link farmers, processors, retailers, financial institutions and Harare markets.

C. Improving Infrastructure, Energy and Digital Connectivity

Government and local authorities should prioritise infrastructure that directly supports productive activity, particularly feeder roads, electricity, water, telecommunications, irrigation and market facilities. Such infrastructure reduces transaction and transport costs, improves access to markets and services, and strengthens agricultural and rural value chains (World Bank, 2024a; GoZ, 2026). Murewa's proximity to Harare will generate greater economic benefits only if producers can transport goods efficiently and access reliable energy and digital services. Electricity shortages have significant effects on agriculture and agro-processing, particularly irrigation, cold-chain operations and storage facilities (World Bank, 2024b). Renewable-energy systems, especially solar power, should therefore complement grid expansion in production centres and irrigation schemes, consistent with Zimbabwe's emphasis on expanding reliable and renewable energy infrastructure (GoZ, 2026). Broadband connectivity should also be extended to rural business centres, schools and other strategic economic locations. This is particularly important because rural communities continue to experience significant connectivity gaps, while digital infrastructure increasingly supports education, business development, financial services and access to markets (ITU, 2025; MICTPCS, 2025).

D. Deepening Devolution and Strengthening Local Institutional Capacity

Devolution in Murewa should move beyond transferring administrative responsibilities towards building genuine local economic-development capacity (GoZ, 2025). Murewa Rural District Council requires predictable financing, competent personnel, effective planning systems and stronger community participation and accountability. Zimbabwe's NDS 2 places inclusive growth, structural transformation, infrastructure development, devolution and job creation among its major

priorities (GoZ, 2025). Fiscal transfers should therefore be accompanied by measurable performance indicators and stronger financial-management systems. A Murewa Local Economic Development Forum involving council, traditional leaders, farmers, businesses, civil society and youth could coordinate investment priorities and monitor implementation. This would complement ongoing national efforts to strengthen local-authority planning, fiscal administration, resource transfers and service delivery (MLGPW, 2026). Zimbabwe's NDS 2 specifically identifies devolution and decentralisation as important mechanisms for promoting equitable and inclusive development and strengthening local authorities.

E. Promoting Inclusive Employment, Youth and Women's Economic Participation

Inclusive growth in Murewa should prioritise productive and decent employment, particularly for young people and women. District authorities, vocational institutions and private-sector partners should provide skills training linked to agro-processing, construction, renewable energy, logistics, digital services and entrepreneurship (AfDB, 2024). Access to appropriate finance should also be expanded through SME financing, savings mechanisms, guarantees and agricultural value-chain finance. Recent African Development Bank support for Zimbabwe highlights the importance of vocational training, entrepreneurship, productivity and market linkages in expanding opportunities for youth and women (AfDB, 2024). In particular, the Bank's Skills for Youth and Women Employability and Productivity Project seeks to expand employment opportunities through TVET, work-integrated learning, internships, job placements, market linkages and entrepreneurship in agricultural value chains (World Bank, 2026a). Progress should therefore be assessed through sustainable jobs, income growth, skills development and participation of disadvantaged groups rather than business registrations alone (World Bank, 2022, 2026b). This approach is consistent with evidence that productivity growth, employability and access to quality employment are more meaningful indicators of inclusive economic transformation than formalisation or enterprise registration alone.

F. Building Climate Resilience, Social Protection and Inclusive Monitoring

Murewa should establish a district resilience framework integrating climate adaptation, disaster preparedness, social protection and economic planning. Early-warning information should reach farmers in accessible forms, while vulnerable households should receive timely support during severe droughts and other shocks (GoZ, 2025; World Bank, 2025). The World Bank recommends stronger early-warning systems, anticipatory action and social protection to reduce the welfare effects of climate shocks in Zimbabwe. It also identifies climate adaptation investments in agricultural research and extension, irrigation, landscape and watershed management, alongside improved early-warning and social-protection systems (World Bank, 2025). The district should monitor agricultural productivity, employment, household incomes, enterprise survival, infrastructure access, women's and youth participation, poverty and climate resilience (GoZ, 2025; World Bank, 2025). Annual participatory reviews involving communities, council, government departments and development partners would allow interventions to be adjusted according to evidence.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that Murewa's regional economic adjustment is occurring through livelihood diversification, agricultural commercialisation and growing integration with Harare, but has yet to achieve deep structural transformation. The evidence demonstrates that proximity to markets alone cannot generate inclusive growth where irrigation, electricity, feeder roads, finance, productive employment and institutional capacity remain constrained. This reinforces the literature's distinction between resilience-based adaptation and transformation: households may successfully diversify to absorb shocks while remaining trapped in low-productivity activities. Zimbabwe's recent economic recovery further illustrates this tension, as national growth has not eliminated rural vulnerability arising from rain-fed agriculture, limited off-farm employment and weak social protection. Murewa's inclusive-growth prospects are therefore conditional on converting agricultural and locational advantages into value-adding enterprises, decent employment and resilient local value chains. The study consequently positions inclusive regional development as an institutional and structural transformation challenge requiring coordinated infrastructure investment, climate resilience, enterprise development and effective decentralised governance.

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