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Original Article

Strategies for Stimulating Sustainable Economic Development in Epworth, Zimbabwe: A Policy and Community-Centred Framework

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Abstract: *Peri-urban settlements in Zimbabwe face persistent challenges of poverty, informality, weak governance, insecure tenure, and limited economic transformation despite their proximity to major urban centres. This study examines strategies for stimulating sustainable economic development in Epworth through a policy and community-centred framework that integrates historical, institutional, and participatory perspectives. Drawing on institutional theory, endogenous development theory, and community-centred development approaches, the study argues that Epworth's contemporary economic constraints are shaped not only by material deficits but also by historical legacies, contested governance arrangements, and fragmented policy responses. A pragmatic research philosophy and convergent parallel mixed-methods design were employed, combining household surveys, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis to examine structural barriers and development opportunities. Findings indicate that sustainable transformation requires more than isolated interventions; rather, it depends on coordinated reforms in land tenure governance, infrastructure provision, entrepreneurship support, skills development, environmental rehabilitation, and multi-stakeholder collaboration. The study further demonstrates that community capabilities, historical identity, and informal economic networks constitute valuable development assets when supported by responsive institutions and inclusive policies. It contributes a context-sensitive framework for peri-urban development by linking historical analysis with contemporary local economic development strategies and provides policy directions for building resilient, inclusive, and sustainable communities in Epworth and comparable urban settlements.*

Keywords: *Sustainable Economic Development, Epworth, Peri-Urban Settlements, Community-Centred Development, Land Tenure Security, Entrepreneurship.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Economic development remains a major policy challenge in Zimbabwe's rapidly expanding peri-urban settlements, where urban growth has exceeded infrastructure provision, institutional capacity, and employment creation (UN-Habitat, 2022; World Bank, 2024; Munyoro et al., 2026). Epworth, located about 12 kilometres southeast of Harare, represents this development paradox. Despite its proximity to the capital city, the settlement continues to face poverty, unemployment, informal economic activity, weak service delivery, insecure land tenure, and limited productive investment (ZIMSTAT, 2023; Munyoro et al., 2026). These challenges have constrained local economic transformation despite residents' entrepreneurial resilience through informal trade and small-scale enterprises (ILO, 2023; Munyoro et al., 2026). Such conditions reflect broader governance weaknesses, including fragmented institutional responsibilities, poor policy coordination, and limited fiscal decentralisation, which have undermined local economic development initiatives (UN-Habitat, 2022; World Bank, 2024; Munyoro et al., 2026; Kabangure & Munyoro, 2026).

Understanding Epworth's historical evolution is essential to explaining its current development challenges. Established as a Methodist Mission in the late nineteenth century, Epworth developed into one of Zimbabwe's largest informal settlements through migration, rapid urbanisation, and contested land occupation (Gundani, 2007; Patel & Adams, 2018). Gundani (2007) highlights that Epworth's identity has been shaped by competing historical narratives involving missionary influence, colonial land administration, and post-independence settlement patterns. These historical legacies continue to affect land security, institutional trust, infrastructure investment, and socio-economic development (UN-Habitat, 2022; World Bank, 2024). Recent research emphasises that sustainable local economic development requires integrated governance systems combining effective institutions with meaningful community participation (UNDP, 2023; OECD, 2023;

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World Bank, 2024)**.** Evidence from sub-Saharan Africa shows that participatory governance, secure property rights, inclusive planning, infrastructure investment, and support for informal enterprises strengthen local economic resilience (OECD, 2023; UNDP, 2023; AfDB, 2024). However, Zimbabwean research remains fragmented, with limited focus on comprehensive economic development approaches that integrate policy reform, historical contexts, and community capabilities. This study addresses this gap by developing a policy and community-centred framework for sustainable economic development in Epworth. It argues that transformation requires coordinated reforms in land governance, participatory planning, institutional collaboration, infrastructure provision, enterprise support, and community engagement (World Bank, 2024; AfDB, 2024; UNDP, 2023). By linking historical analysis with contemporary local economic development theory, the study contributes practical strategies for Epworth and other peri-urban settlements experiencing similar challenges.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Epworth's historical evolution from a Methodist mission settlement to a major informal peri-urban settlement has shaped its current socio-economic challenges, including insecure tenure, inadequate infrastructure and limited employment (Ncube & Kgatla, 2021; UN-Habitat, 2022; Bandauko et al., 2023). However, its entrepreneurial capacity and social capital offer development opportunities. This study therefore, examines how inclusive governance, community participation and policy integration can promote sustainable local economic development.

A. Land Tenure Ambiguities

Land tenure ambiguities remain a major structural barrier to sustainable economic development in informal settlements such as Epworth, where insecure land rights discourage investment in housing, businesses and infrastructure due to risks of eviction, disputes and uncertain compensation (Zazyki et al., 2022; Ferree et al., 2023; Munyoro et al, 2026; Kabangure & Munyoro, 2026). In Zimbabwe, overlapping statutory, customary and informal land administration systems, combined with political influence and fragmented governance, undermine secure property rights (Chatiza & Gotora, 2021; UN-Habitat, 2022; Bandauko et al., 2023; Munyoro et al, 2026; Kabangure & Munyoro, 2026). Although land titling is often promoted as a solution, recent studies argue that perceived tenure security and locally legitimate governance arrangements are equally important (Payne et al, 2021; UN-Habitat, 2022; World Bank, 2023). In Epworth, residents rely on de facto tenure mechanisms such as community-issued certificates, political endorsements and utility records, while also using legal mobilisation, political negotiation and collective action to defend occupancy rights; however, these arrangements remain vulnerable because they depend on shifting political dynamics rather than stable institutions (Karakadzai & Mpahlo, 2023; Bhanye et al., 2023; Munyoro et al, 2026; Kabangure & Munyoro, 2026). Politically mediated land allocation and housing demolitions have further weakened household resilience and entrepreneurship (Mbiba, 2022; Munyoro et al, 2026; Kabangure & Munyoro, 2026). Although participatory upgrading initiatives have improved confidence in land rights, challenges in land administration, registration and service provision continue to constrain investment and keep economic activities concentrated in low-capital informal enterprises (Bandauko et al., 2023). Overall, strengthening tenure security through legal recognition, participatory governance, transparent administration and institutional coordination is essential for promoting investment, enterprise development and inclusive local economic growth in Epworth (UN-Habitat, 2022; World Bank, 2023; Bandauko et al., 2023).

B. Missionary Legacy and Social Structure

Epworth's historical development is deeply rooted in its origins as a Methodist mission station established in the late nineteenth century, where Christianity, education, agriculture, and social welfare were promoted alongside colonial systems that reinforced segregation, paternalistic governance, and limited indigenous economic participation (Gundani,2007; Ncube & Kgatla, 2021). This missionary legacy continues to shape contemporary governance, land administration, social networks, and community identity through institutional path dependency, resulting in a hybrid governance system that combines religious institutions, community networks, and state authorities (North, 1990; Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Ostrom, 2005; Gundani, 2007; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Although the Methodist Church remains influential in education, welfare, and community mobilisation, overlapping formal and informal governance structures create coordination challenges that weaken local economic planning and policy implementation (Gundani, 2007; Chitekwe-Biti et al., 2012; Epworth Local Board, 2025). While some scholars argue that missionary institutions foster social cohesion, trust, and collective action through welfare and educational initiatives (Gundani, 2007; Mujinga, 2023), others contend that they perpetuate dependency and hierarchical relationships that constrain local autonomy and participatory development (Ncube & Kgatla, 2021). Despite substantial historical research, there remains limited understanding of how these missionary legacies influence entrepreneurship, informal economic activities, governance, and investment in Epworth, a gap this study addresses by applying institutional theory and community-centred development approaches to examine their implications for sustainable socio-economic development.

C. Contested Narratives and Policy Hesitancy

Contested narratives surrounding informal settlements have significantly influenced urban development policy across the Global South, with governments often portraying these areas as illegal and disorderly while scholars highlight their contributions to innovation, entrepreneurship and resilience despite institutional neglect (Mottelson, 2023; Ouma et al., 2024). This tension has contributed to policy hesitancy, fragmented governance and weak implementation of inclusive development strategies (UN-Habitat; Munyoro et al, 2026; Kabangure & Munyoro, 2026). In Zimbabwe, colonial planning legacies continue to shape exclusionary governance, where informal economic activities are often managed through coercive regulation rather than developmental support, despite evidence that informal traders have developed adaptive livelihood strategies and that community-centred governance can strengthen urban resilience (Tanyanyiwa et al, 2023; Ouma et al., 2024). Institutional barriers such as weak trust, competing stakeholder interests and political uncertainty further undermine collaborative governance and investment in infrastructure, livelihoods and service delivery (OECD, 2024; Munyoro et al, 2026; Kabangure & Munyoro, 2026). However, while participatory governance is widely recognised as a means of promoting inclusive development, there remains limited empirical evidence on how contested narratives influence economic development strategies in peri-urban settlements such as Epworth, a gap this study addresses by examining how changing policy perceptions and strengthening community-centred governance can enhance inclusive economic development through improved institutional collaboration and policy coherence.

a) Current Challenges to Economic Development in Epworth

Economic development in Epworth is constrained by interconnected structural, institutional and socio-economic challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, weak governance, insecure land tenure, limited access to finance, environmental degradation and poor public service delivery, all of which hinder sustainable livelihoods and inclusive growth (World Bank, 2024; Munyoro et al., 2026; Kabangure & Munyoro, 2026). Although the settlement has a vibrant informal economy that provides employment and household income, its dominance reflects deeper structural weaknesses, resulting in persistent poverty, inequality and low productivity rather than long-term economic transformation (Magidi, 2024; Munyoro et al., 2026; Kabangure & Munyoro, 2026). Poor roads, unreliable water, sanitation and electricity services, weak digital connectivity, and limited infrastructure investment increase business costs and discourage investment, while governance fragmentation, inadequate fiscal resources and weak institutional coordination further undermine planning and service delivery (Finn & Bandauko, 2024; World Bank, 2024; Munyoro et al., 2026; Kabangure & Munyoro, 2026). Insecure land tenure and widespread informality restrict access to credit, legal protection and formal markets, limiting business expansion despite improving livelihood resilience (UN-Habitat, 2024; Munyoro et al., 2026; Kabangure & Munyoro, 2026). Addressing these challenges requires integrated policies that strengthen institutions, improve infrastructure, enhance tenure security, promote community participation, create employment, support environmental sustainability and foster inclusive economic development consistent with endogenous development theory (ILO, 2024; World Bank, 2024; Munyoro et al., 2026; Kabangure & Munyoro, 2026).Bottom of Form

b) Regularisation of Land Tenure

The regularisation of land tenure has increasingly been recognised as a fundamental strategy for stimulating inclusive economic development, particularly within informal and peri-urban settlements such as Epworth, Zimbabwe. Land tenure regularisation refers to the legal, administrative and institutional processes through which informal land occupation is transformed into legally recognised and secure property rights. Secure tenure enhances investment incentives, improves access to credit, reduces land disputes and encourages infrastructure development, thereby creating conditions conducive to sustainable local economic growth (UN-Habitat, 2024; Enemark et al., 2025). However, contemporary scholarship challenges the conventional assumption that formal land titles alone automatically generate economic prosperity (Holland & Diop, 2022). Rather, evidence suggests that tenure security produces meaningful developmental outcomes only when embedded within effective governance systems, participatory planning, accessible financial markets and responsive public institutions (Holland & Diop, 2022; Sugathadasa & Hemachandra, 2026). Recent systematic reviews further demonstrate that although most land governance interventions generate positive socioeconomic outcomes, their effectiveness is highly dependent on institutional quality, legal certainty and community participation, implying that land regularisation should be viewed as one component of a broader development framework rather than a standalone policy intervention (Huntington & Lisher, 2025; Sugathadasa & Hemachandra, 2026).

c) Urban Infrastructure

Urban infrastructure comprises the physical and institutional systems that support economic activity, mobility, service delivery and improved livelihoods through transport, water and sanitation, electricity, housing, digital connectivity and public facilities (UN-Habitat, 2024; World Bank, 2024). Contemporary literature views infrastructure as an integrated socio-technical system whose effectiveness depends not only on physical investment but also on governance quality, institutional coordination, financing and community participation (Gansauer & Haggerty, 2024; Mwaura & Lawhon, 2024).

While infrastructure investment can enhance urban competitiveness by improving accessibility, reducing transaction costs and attracting private investment, evidence from developing countries shows that its contribution to economic transformation is constrained by weak institutional capacity and inadequate planning (OECD, 2024; World Bank, 2024; Munyoro et al., 2026; Kabangure & Munyoro, 2026). In Zimbabwe, decentralisation has increased local authorities' service delivery responsibilities without sufficient fiscal resources, contributing to deteriorating infrastructure that limits local economic development, particularly in Epworth, where poor roads, drainage, sanitation and public utilities hinder informal enterprise growth and household welfare (Finn & Bandauko, 2024; Munyoro et al., 2026; Kabangure & Munyoro, 2026). Consequently, integrated infrastructure planning that combines investment with governance reforms, institutional accountability and community participation is regarded as essential for promoting inclusive and sustainable economic development, supporting this study's hypothesis that improved urban infrastructure can enhance accessibility, productivity, investment attractiveness and community resilience in Epworth (UN-Habitat, 2024; World Bank, 2024; Munyoro et al., 2026; Kabangure & Munyoro, 2026).

d) Entrepreneurship and SME Growth

Entrepreneurship and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are widely recognised as key drivers of economic development, employment creation, innovation, and poverty reduction, particularly in developing economies (Munyoro et al., 2016; OECD, 2023; ILO, 2023; World Bank, 2024).Entrepreneurship involves identifying and exploiting business opportunities under conditions of uncertainty, while SME growth depends not only on entrepreneurial ability but also on access to finance, institutional quality, supportive policies, infrastructure, innovation systems and social networks (Munyoro et al, 2016; Garcia-Martinez et al., 2023; Audretsch & Guenther, 2023). The entrepreneurial ecosystem perspective argues that entrepreneurship is shaped by interconnected economic, institutional and community systems, making coordinated interventions in finance, education, infrastructure and governance essential for sustainable enterprise development (Candeias & Sarkar, 2023). Evidence shows that innovation, networking, market access, financial services and institutional support significantly enhance SME performance, although in Africa entrepreneurship is often necessity-driven, limiting long-term growth (Fu & Krauss, 2023; Hansen-Addy et al., 2024; Sibiya et al., 2023). In Zimbabwe, SMEs play a critical role in employment and household income despite persistent macroeconomic instability, yet limited finance, inadequate infrastructure, regulatory complexity and weak institutional coordination continue to constrain enterprise growth, particularly in peri-urban areas such as Epworth (Munyoro et al, 2016; Musabayana et al., 2023 Munyoro et al, 2026). This study therefore argues that entrepreneurship and SME growth in Epworth are best supported through integrated, community-centred policies and governance frameworks that promote sustainable local economic development rather than fragmented interventions.

e) Skills Development

Skills development is a key driver of local economic development because it improves productivity, entrepreneurship, innovation, employability and communities' ability to adapt to changing economic conditions (OECD, 2023; ILO, 2024). It extends beyond formal education to include vocational training, entrepreneurship, digital literacy and lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2024). Recent studies emphasise that skills programmes should be demand-driven, locally relevant and aligned with labour market needs (OECD, 2023; World Bank, 2024). Wear (2024) argues that local economic development increasingly depends on innovation ecosystems that integrate skills, technology and institutional collaboration. Similarly, Shyiramunda and Van den Bersselaar (2024) highlight the Quadruple Helix Model, which promotes collaboration among government, educational institutions, businesses and communities to strengthen local economic transformation. However, skills development alone cannot achieve inclusive growth without supportive institutions, infrastructure and access to finance (World Bank, 2024; UNDP, 2024). Leger et al. (2024) found that entrepreneurship training often improves knowledge but has limited effects on business survival and employment because of contextual barriers. Mensah (2024) similarly argues that institutional capacity and governance determine whether skills translate into economic opportunities. Furthermore, community participation enhances programme relevance and sustainability. Jamal and Gordon (2024) and Chomane and Biljohn (2023) emphasise involving local stakeholders in identifying skills needs and designing interventions. For Epworth, integrating skills development with entrepreneurship support, institutional partnerships and participatory governance is essential for sustainable local economic development.Top of Form

i.Community Development

Community development is a key driver of inclusive economic development because it promotes local participation, collective action, social capital and the mobilisation of community assets, empowering residents to actively participate in planning, decision-making and livelihood creation (United Nations, 2023; World Bank, 2024). The Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach emphasises that communities possess valuable skills, networks and informal economic practices that support sustainable development (Chirisa, 2020), but community-led efforts alone cannot address structural challenges such as unemployment, weak institutions and limited access to finance. Research in Epworth shows that

participatory governance, collaboration between communities and government, and strong institutional support can produce locally appropriate solutions while strengthening resilience through trust, cooperation, informal enterprises and savings groups (Chitekwe-Biti et al., 2012). Sustainable development therefore requires partnerships among communities, government, civil society and the private sector, alongside policies that promote skills development, microfinance, improved infrastructure and supportive regulations to create inclusive, long-term economic growth (World Bank, 2024; Meki & Quinn, 2024).

ii.Spatial Planning and Environmental Rehabilitation

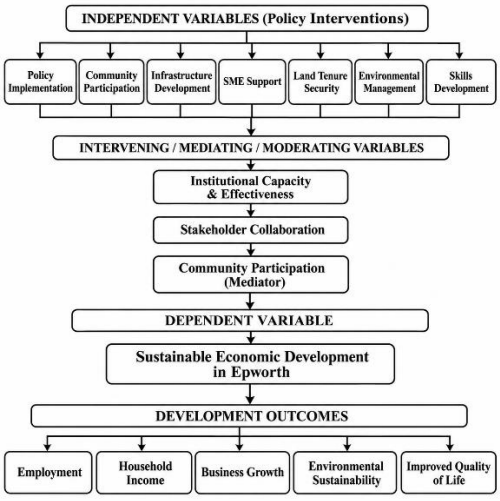
Spatial planning and environmental rehabilitation are critical for promoting inclusive and sustainable economic development in rapidly urbanising settlements such as Epworth (MoNHSA, 2020; UN-Habitat, 2022). Effective spatial planning integrates land use, infrastructure, housing, environmental management, and community needs to address challenges arising from unplanned urban growth, including environmental degradation, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-economic exclusion (UN-Habitat, 2022; United Nations, 2023). Research highlights that participatory and transformative planning approaches, which recognise informal settlements as integral parts of the urban landscape, are more effective than conventional models that often marginalise low-income communities (Matamanda, 2019; Chitekwe-Biti et al., 2012). Environmental rehabilitation through measures such as wetland protection, improved drainage, waste management, green public spaces, and climate-resilient infrastructure reduces environmental risks while supporting healthier living conditions, provided it safeguards tenure security and prevents displacement (IPCC, 2023; Munyoro et al., 2026; Kabangure & Munyoro, 2026). Participatory planning, supported by community mapping and collaboration among government, residents, civil society, and technical experts, strengthens local involvement in development decisions, although institutional weaknesses and unequal power relations remain challenges (UN-Habitat, 2022; World Bank, 2024). Overall, the literature emphasises that sustainable development in Epworth depends on integrated governance that combines environmental sustainability, community participation, secure land tenure, infrastructure improvement, and economic empowerment to build resilient and inclusive urban communities (United Nations, 2023; World Bank, 2024).Bottom of Form

iii.Governance and Institutional Collaboration

Governance and institutional collaboration are essential for sustainable economic development in rapidly urbanising communities such as Epworth. Effective governance relies on coordinated action among government, the private sector, civil society, and local communities through participation, accountability, and shared decision-making rather than top-down approaches (Ansell & Gash, 2008). In Epworth, fragmented governance, weak institutional capacity, and inadequate infrastructure have limited inclusive development, while evidence shows that partnerships among local authorities, communities, and technical experts can improve planning, service delivery, livelihoods, and settlement upgrading when residents are treated as active development partners (Chitekwe-Biti et al., 2012). Drawing on the concept of co-production (Ostrom, 1996), sustainable development can be strengthened by combining community knowledge and resources with institutional support, fostering transparent, accountable, and inclusive collaboration among municipal authorities, government agencies, private investors, academic institutions, and community organisations to promote entrepreneurship, infrastructure development, and employment.

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A. Conceptual Framework Diagram



B. The relationship between the above diagram and hypotheses

*(In actual fact, the structure above aligns with the proposed hypotheses below)

H1: Effective policy implementation positively influences sustainable economic development in Epworth.

H2: Community participation significantly mediates the relationship between policy implementation and sustainable economic development.

H3: Infrastructure development, SME support, environmental management and skills development have significant positive effects on sustainable economic development.

H4: Institutional capacity and stakeholder collaboration positively moderate the relationship between policy implementation and sustainable economic development.

C. The Explanation to the Proposed Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the premise that sustainable economic development in Epworth depends on the interaction between policy interventions, community participation, institutional capacity, and environmental sustainability (United Nations, 2023). Sustainable economic development is treated as the dependent variable, while policy implementation, infrastructure development, SME support, land tenure security, environmental management and skills development are identified as key independent variables. Institutional effectiveness and stakeholder collaboration act as intervening factors that influence how policy actions translate into development outcomes. This perspective recognises that economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection are interconnected elements of sustainable urban development (United Nations, 2023; World Bank, 2024).

The framework is informed by Sustainable Livelihoods Theory, Endogenous Development Theory and Institutional Theory, which collectively explain the importance of local capacities, community resources and effective governance in promoting sustainable development. Policy implementation is viewed as a major catalyst through mechanisms such as secure land tenure, improved infrastructure, regulatory enforcement, and support for small and medium enterprises (World Bank, 2023; OECD, 2023). Community participation further strengthens development outcomes by promoting ownership, accountability and alignment of interventions with local needs. Infrastructure improvement, skills development, SME support and environmental management are considered complementary drivers that enhance employment, investment, resilience and quality of life (North, 1990; Scoones, 2015; OECD, 2023). The framework also proposes that coordinated and integrated policy interventions can achieve sustainable economic development in Epworth through increased employment, improved household incomes, business growth and environmental sustainability. Institutional capacity and stakeholder collaboration influence the effectiveness of these interventions, while community participation strengthens implementation through empowerment and accountability (Higham et al., 2024; Dushkova & Ivlieva, 2024). By examining the interconnected effects of governance, infrastructure, entrepreneurship and environmental management, the framework provides a basis for assessing how integrated, community-centred strategies can promote sustainable urban development (ILO, 2023; AfDB, 2024).

D. Policy Framework for Implementation

a) Short-term priorities (1–2 years).

The immediate implementation phase should prioritise the establishment of secure land tenure systems, improved waste management services and comprehensive support for SMEs through marketplace rehabilitation and access to finance. These interventions address the structural constraints that limit investment, business formalisation and environmental health while laying the institutional foundation for sustainable development. Early policy success is expected to improve community confidence and stimulate local economic activity (UN-Habitat, 2022; World Bank, 2024).

i.Medium-term priorities (3–5 years).

The second phase should focus on rehabilitating roads, expanding electrification, establishing vocational training centres and implementing environmental restoration programmes. These investments strengthen productive capacity, improve market accessibility, enhance workforce competitiveness and promote climate resilience. The combination of infrastructure and human capital development is expected to increase productivity and attract private investment while supporting inclusive economic growth (ILO, 2023; AfDB, 2024).

ii.Long-term priorities (5+ years).

The final phase should pursue the strategic integration of Epworth into the Harare metropolitan economy through industrial development, affordable housing expansion and the promotion of tourism and cultural industries. Long-term urban planning should encourage economic diversification, investment attraction and sustainable land use while preserving

local cultural assets. Such integrated urban transformation aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDGs 8, 11 and 17, by promoting inclusive growth, resilient cities and effective partnerships (United Nations, 2023; OECD, 2023).

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Philosophy and Paradigm

This study adopted the pragmatism research philosophy, which was well suited to investigating sustainable economic development in Epworth through a mixed-methods approach, as pragmatism emphasizes selecting methods that best address the research problem by integrating both quantitative and qualitative evidence (Mertler et al, 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Pragmatism recognised that complex governance and development challenges required multiple forms of evidence to generate practical and context-specific solutions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Saunders et al., 2023). Sustainable economic development involved measurable outcomes such as institutional resilience, service delivery efficiency and citizen satisfaction, as well as subjective experiences, leadership practices and community participation. Pragmatism therefore supported the integration of quantitative and qualitative methods, combining deductive and inductive reasoning to strengthen methodological coherence, triangulation and evidence-based policy recommendations.

B. Research Design

The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously, analysed separately and integrated during interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Mertler et al, 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This design enabled the study to examine statistical relationships among adaptive digital resilience, foresight-driven leadership, institutional resilience, service delivery efficiency, citizen satisfaction and sustainable urban governance while also exploring stakeholder experiences and governance processes that explained these relationships (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Equal priority was given to both strands to enhance validity and minimise the limitations of using a single method (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2021). Integration through joint displays, narrative weaving and triangulation generated comprehensive findings capable of informing adaptive governance and sustainable economic development in Epworth.

C. Study Area

The study was conducted in Epworth, a rapidly urbanising peri-urban settlement approximately 12 km south-east of Harare, Zimbabwe. Epworth faces significant socio-economic challenges, including widespread informality, inadequate infrastructure and basic service provision, high unemployment, environmental degradation, and weak institutional capacity, all of which have constrained sustainable urban development and effective local governance (Chitekwe-Biti et al., 2012; Marongwe, 2013; Finn & Bandauko, 2024). At the same time, it demonstrated considerable potential for community participation, entrepreneurship and local economic development initiatives. Its rapid growth and governance challenges made it an appropriate setting for examining how leadership, institutional resilience, digital resilience and citizen participation influenced sustainable economic development (Munyoro, 2026). The findings were expected to inform policy in Epworth and similar urban settlements across Zimbabwe and Sub-Saharan Africa.

D. Target Population and Sampling

The target population included households in Epworth, officials from the Epworth Local Board, government representatives, community-based organisations, informal business operators, civil society organisations, traditional leaders, youth and women's groups, and private-sector stakeholders involved in local economic development. A multistage sampling strategy was employed to improve the efficiency of selecting participants while ensuring adequate representation of different population groups across the study area (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). For the quantitative component, stratified random sampling ensured representation across administrative wards, while Cochran's formula was used to determine the appropriate sample size for achieving statistical representativeness (Cochran, 1977). For the qualitative component, purposive sampling identified participants with relevant expertise and experience, while snowball sampling was used where necessary to recruit specialised informants with knowledge of local economic development and governance issues (Patton, 2015). Focus group discussions captured community perspectives on governance and development, allowing participants to collectively discuss local challenges and opportunities. Combining probability and non-probability sampling techniques enhanced both the representativeness of the quantitative findings and the contextual depth of the qualitative data, thereby strengthening the overall validity and credibility of the mixed-methods research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

E. Data Collection Methods

Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires with validated Likert-scale items measuring adaptive digital resilience, foresight-driven leadership, institutional resilience, service delivery efficiency, citizen satisfaction, and sustainable urban governance (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The questionnaire was pilot tested to assess clarity and reliability, with internal consistency evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability, and construct validity assessed through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis where appropriate (Hair Jr. et al., 2022). Qualitative data were

gathered through semi-structured interviews with policymakers and institutional leaders, as well as focus group discussions with community members (Flick, 2022). Documentary analysis of legislation, policy documents, and local authority reports provided additional contextual evidence by enabling triangulation and verification of governance processes and institutional practices (Denzin, 2023). These complementary methods enabled the study to capture both measurable governance outcomes and stakeholder experiences, thereby enhancing the credibility and comprehensiveness of the findings.

F. Data Analysis and Integration

Quantitative and qualitative data were analysed independently before integration. Quantitative analysis was conducted using SPSS and AMOS or SmartPLS. Descriptive statistics summarised respondent characteristics, while Pearson correlation, multiple regression and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) tested the hypothesised relationships among the study variables (Hair et al., 2022). Qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis, involving coding, theme development and interpretation to identify governance processes and institutional dynamics influencing sustainable economic development. Findings from both strands were then integrated through joint displays, narrative comparison and triangulation (Fetters, 2020). Areas of convergence strengthened confidence in the findings, complementary evidence enriched interpretation, and divergent findings highlighted contextual complexities requiring nuanced policy responses.

G. Validity, Reliability and Trustworthiness

Methodological rigour was ensured through procedures that enhanced validity, reliability and trustworthiness (Creswell and Creswell, 2023). Quantitative validity was supported through expert review, pilot testing, factor analysis and assessment of convergent and discriminant validity using Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Composite Reliability (CR) and the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT), where appropriate (Hair et al., 2022). Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with values of 0.70 or above considered acceptable (Hair et al., 2022). Qualitative trustworthiness was strengthened through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced through member checking, prolonged engagement and triangulation, while dependability and confirmability were supported through an audit trail and researcher reflexivity. Rich contextual descriptions improved transferability (Creswell and Poth, 2024).

H. Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles guided all stages of the study. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee, while permission was sought from the Epworth Local Board and relevant authorities before data collection, in accordance with internationally accepted ethical review procedures for research involving human participants (WMA, 2024). Participation was voluntary, with informed consent obtained from all respondents after they had received adequate information about the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of the study (CIOMS, 2021). Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of identification codes, restricted access to research data, and secure data storage practices consistent with established research ethics guidelines (APA, 2020). Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty or adverse consequences, in line with internationally recognized principles of respect for persons and autonomy (CIOMS, 2021). The study adhered to principles of honesty, transparency, and scientific integrity by ensuring that data were collected, analyzed, and reported accurately without fabrication, falsification, or selective omission, consistent with responsible research conduct (NASEM, 2017). Cultural sensitivities, human dignity, and participant welfare were respected throughout the research process to ensure that the study was ethically sound and contributed meaningfully to sustainable economic development in Epworth (UNESCO, 2021).

V. FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Response Rate, Demographic Characteristics, and Data Quality Assessment

A total of 420 questionnaires were distributed using stratified sampling procedures based on key population characteristics, including gender, socio-economic status, and economic participation, to ensure that important subgroups of the population were adequately represented and to improve the representativeness of the sample (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Saunders et al., 2023). Of these, 386 were completed, producing a response rate of 91.9%. This high response rate exceeds commonly accepted standards for social science research and provided a strong basis for reliable statistical analysis (Saunders et al., 2023; Dillman et al., 2024). The strong participation was supported by community-based research assistants, stakeholder engagement, and the relevance of sustainable development issues to residents' daily experiences, factors that have been shown to enhance respondent cooperation and survey completion rates (Dillman et al., 2024).

The demographic profile indicates that Epworth's economy is largely driven by the working-age population using diverse livelihood strategies. Respondents aged 31–45 years formed the largest group (40.4%), reflecting the importance of economically active residents in household income generation (ILO, 2024; Munyoro et al., 2026). The high proportion of informal entrepreneurs (43.5%) highlights the central role of informal economic activities, including small-scale trading,

home-based businesses, and service provision (UN-Habitat., 2022; Munyoro et al., 2026). These activities provide employment and household resilience in contexts where formal employment opportunities remain limited (Kamete, 2020; UN-Habitat, 2022; ILO, 2024). Sustainable development interventions in Epworth should therefore view informal enterprises as potential drivers of local economic growth rather than merely survival mechanisms (ILO, 2024; Munyoro et al., 2026).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n=386)

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male respondents	205	53.1
Female respondents	181	46.9
Age 18–30 years	124	32.1
Age 31–45 years	156	40.4
Age 46 years and above	106	27.5
Informal traders/business operators	168	43.5
Salaried employees	74	19.2
Unemployed/job seekers	98	25.4
Other livelihood activities	46	11.9

The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients for key constructs: historical memory, institutional trust, community identity, social capital, economic participation, and service delivery effectiveness (Joseph F. Hair Jr. et al., 2022).

Construct	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Historical memory attachment	6	0.84
Institutional trust	7	0.87
Community identity	8	0.86
Social capital	6	0.82
Economic participation	7	0.88
Service delivery effectiveness	6	0.85

All constructs recorded alpha values above 0.70, confirming satisfactory internal consistency and reliability (Hair et al., 2022). Economic participation recorded the highest reliability ($\alpha = 0.88$), followed by institutional trust ($\alpha = 0.87$) and community identity ($\alpha = 0.86$), demonstrating that the measures were suitable for analysing economic, governance, and social dimensions of development. Construct validity was confirmed through exploratory factor analysis. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) value of 0.83 indicated adequate sampling suitability, while Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 1846.27$, $p < .001$), confirming appropriate relationships among variables for factor analysis (Tabachnick et al., 2019; Hair et al., 2022). The credibility of qualitative findings was strengthened through triangulation of interviews, focus groups, observations, and document analysis. The study conducted 26 key informant interviews and four focus group discussions involving local leaders, business operators, residents, and officials. Data saturation was reached after the twenty-third interview when additional interviews produced no substantially new themes (Guest et al., 2020). Qualitative findings showed that residents understand development through historical experiences, institutional relationships, and community identity. One long-term resident noted that '*Epworth's history and institutions should be recognised when planning future development'*. This reflects the view that economic transformation depends not only on financial investment but also on governance systems, social relationships, and historical pathways (North, 1990; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2019). Overall, the response rate, demographic representation, reliability tests, and qualitative validation demonstrate that the dataset provides a strong foundation for analysing sustainable economic development strategies in Epworth. The findings suggest that effective transformation requires integrated approaches combining good governance, community participation, recognition of local history, support for informal entrepreneurship, and locally grounded development policies (Scoones, 2015; World Bank, 2022).

B. Historical Memory as a Strategic Asset for Sustainable Development

The findings demonstrate that historical memory represents an important development resource that can strengthen community participation, legitimacy, and collective action in Epworth. Rather than viewing history as a passive cultural element, residents perceive historical experiences as shaping contemporary economic identity and influencing their willingness to engage in development initiatives. Survey findings revealed strong attachment to Epworth's historical identity, particularly its Methodist mission heritage, educational traditions, and community-based organisational structures. The historical memory index recorded a high mean score of 4.12 (SD = 0.71), indicating that residents consider historical identity relevant to present development planning. The statement that "the historical background of Epworth should influence current development planning" received the highest rating (Mean = 4.43, SD = 0.61), demonstrating strong support for integrating local history into economic policy frameworks.

Regression analysis showed that historical memory significantly predicted community participation, explaining 28.6% of variation in participation levels ($\beta = 0.536$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that residents with stronger connections to Epworth's historical identity were more likely to participate in economic initiatives, community organisations, and local development activities. These findings support place-based development approaches, which argue that sustainable economic transformation depends on recognising local knowledge, cultural resources, and historically embedded institutions as foundations for development planning (OECD, 2023; UNDP, 2023). In Epworth, historical memory can therefore function as a strategic resource for strengthening social cohesion, improving policy legitimacy, and encouraging community ownership of economic programmes.

Qualitative evidence reinforced the role of the Methodist mission legacy in shaping collective values associated with education, cooperation, and self-improvement. One long-term resident explained:

"Epworth is not just a place where people came to stay. It has a history. Many people forget that this community was built through institutions that educated and supported people before independence. Development must recognise that history."

This perspective demonstrates that residents understand economic transformation through historical experiences rather than economic indicators alone. The finding reflects institutional theory, which emphasises that development outcomes are shaped by historical pathways, institutional arrangements, and enduring social relationships (North, 1990; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2019). However, the study also identified tensions associated with historical identity. While collective memory strengthens belonging, claims of being "original" community members may unintentionally exclude younger residents and newer households. A youth participant stated:

"Some people say they are the original community members and deserve more recognition, but many young people were born here. We also belong and should be included in shaping the future."

Therefore, sustainable development strategies in Epworth should adopt an inclusive historical approach that preserves community heritage while ensuring that all residents participate in defining future economic priorities. Overall, the findings suggest that historical memory should be incorporated into a policy and community-centred economic development framework through three strategic pathways: strengthening local ownership of development programmes, improving community participation in decision-making, and using historical institutions as platforms for entrepreneurship, education, and social mobilisation.

C. Land Tenure Ambiguities

Epworth's sustainable economic development is constrained by persistent land tenure uncertainty arising from rapid population growth, informal settlements, and complex land administration systems that leave many residents without secure or formally recognised land rights. This insecurity discourages long-term investment in housing, businesses, and other productive activities, while also limiting access to formal financial services, business licensing, infrastructure, and broader economic opportunities (World Bank, 2023; UN-Habitat, 2024). Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated, community-centred approach that combines participatory land regularisation, transparent land allocation, improved land-use planning, and recognition of legitimate occupancy rights with collaboration among government institutions, local authorities, community leaders, civil society, and residents. By integrating tenure security with infrastructure development, housing initiatives, and local economic empowerment programmes (FAO, 2023; UN-Habitat, 2024), Epworth can strengthen land governance, encourage investment, reduce conflicts, promote formal economic participation, and support the development of a resilient and sustainable local economy (World Bank, 2023; United Nations, 2023).

D. Missionary Legacy and Social Structure

Epworth's historical development stems from its establishment as a Methodist mission station in the late nineteenth century, a legacy that shaped its social organisation, land tenure, education, and governance (Gondongwe, 2011; Ncube & Kgatla, 2021). While missionary institutions promoted social cohesion through education, healthcare, and community support, they also established an informal land tenure system that left many residents without secure ownership, creating governance conflicts, weak institutional accountability, and constraints on investment, infrastructure, and urban planning after independence (Chitekwe-Biti et al., 2012; Ncube & Kgatla, 2021). Addressing these historical challenges requires institutional reforms that strengthen land tenure security, transparent governance, and participatory planning while leveraging the churches' continued role in education, health, civic engagement, and community mobilisation (Ncube & Kgatla, 2021; UN-Habitat, 2022). Epworth's experience highlights that sustainable economic development depends on resilient institutions, inclusive governance, and collaboration among government, churches, civil society, and residents to improve service delivery, social inclusion, and long-term economic transformation (Chitekwe-Biti et al., 2012; Ncube & Kgatla, 2021).

E. Contested Narratives and Policy Hesitancy

Policy narratives and persistent policy hesitancy have significantly constrained sustainable economic development in Epworth by shaping conflicting interpretations of informality, poverty, urbanisation and local economic development. While government institutions have often framed Epworth as an informal settlement requiring regulation and enforcement because of illegal land occupation, environmental degradation and inadequate infrastructure, community organisations and development practitioners view it as a resilient socio-economic space with strong entrepreneurial potential that should be supported through participatory development approaches (Chitekwe-Biti et al., 2012; Chirisa & Muhomba, 2013). These competing narratives have resulted in inconsistent policy implementation, with authorities alternating between tolerance, regulation and enforcement, thereby discouraging investment, weakening entrepreneurship and reducing confidence in public institutions (Gunhidzirai, 2024; Bhanye, 2026). Institutional fragmentation, overlapping mandates, limited fiscal decentralisation and political contestation have further undermined coordinated governance, while unresolved land tenure and planning issues continue to restrict access to formal credit, infrastructure and productive investment, reinforcing economic informality (Chirisa & Muhomba, 2013; Bhanye et al., 2024). Consequently, recent scholarship argues that sustainable local economic transformation requires replacing conflicting policy narratives with collaborative, community-centred governance frameworks that recognise residents as active development partners and provide coherent policy support for inclusive and sustainable development (Gunhidzirai, 2024; Bhanye, 2026).

F. Contested Narratives and Policy Hesitancy

The pursuit of sustainable economic development in Epworth has been hindered by contested policy narratives and persistent policy hesitancy, resulting in fragmented and inconsistent development interventions. While one dominant narrative portrays Epworth as an informal settlement requiring regulatory control because of illegal land occupation, environmental degradation and inadequate infrastructure, an alternative perspective advanced by community organisations and development practitioners recognises the area as a vibrant socio-economic space with entrepreneurial potential, social capital and resilience that can support participatory development (Chitekwe-Biti et al., 2012; Chirisa & Muhomba, 2013; Munyoro et al, 2026). These competing perspectives have led government institutions to alternate between tolerance, regulation and enforcement rather than integrating informal economic activities into broader urban development strategies, discouraging private investment, weakening entrepreneurship and limiting donor coordination and infrastructure financing (World Bank, 2022; ILO, 2023). Policy hesitancy is further reinforced by institutional fragmentation, overlapping mandates, limited fiscal decentralisation and political contestation, while unresolved land tenure, housing regulation and settlement upgrading issues continue to discourage investment, restrict access to formal credit and infrastructure services, and perpetuate informality (UN-Habitat, 2024; United Nations Zimbabwe, 2025). In actual fact, policy transfer without adequate institutional preparedness often creates implementation gaps that undermine development outcomes, highlighting the importance of collaborative governance frameworks that recognise local communities as active partners in sustainable economic development.

G. Current Challenges to Economic Development

Despite its strategic location within the Harare Metropolitan Province and entrepreneurial potential, Epworth faces structural and institutional challenges that constrain sustainable economic development. The dominance of the informal economy, where many residents rely on informal trading, small-scale manufacturing, recycling, and survivalist activities, limits access to finance, business support, formal markets, and productivity growth (World Bank, 2022; 2024). Poor infrastructure, including inadequate roads, electricity, water supply, sanitation, drainage, and waste management, raises business costs, discourages investment, and increases environmental and public health risks, with Epworth identified among the least serviced urban settlements in Greater Harare (World Bank, 2025). Land tenure insecurity, limited access to

affordable finance, high unemployment, and insufficient skills development further restrict enterprise growth, particularly among women and youth (ILO, 2024; World Bank, 2024). Environmental challenges such as illegal sand extraction, deforestation, wetland encroachment, poor waste disposal, and pollution increase vulnerability to flooding and climate-related shocks (UNEP, 2024; ZELA, 2023). Weak institutional capacity, policy inconsistency, and macroeconomic instability also undermine service delivery, investment, productivity, and employment creation (World Bank, 2024). Social inequalities and rapid urbanisation continue to place pressure on housing, infrastructure, public services, and natural resources, reinforcing the need for coordinated interventions that promote inclusive economic development, improved governance, environmental sustainability, and resilient urban planning (UN-Habitat, 2024; AfDB, 2023).

H. Regularisation of Land Tenure

Land tenure regularisation is a key strategy for promoting sustainable economic development in Epworth, Zimbabwe, by improving investment confidence, access to finance, orderly urban development, and household investment in housing and enterprises (UN-Habitat, 2020; World Bank, 2022). Insecure informal land ownership has constrained economic productivity, infrastructure development, environmental management, and governance, making tenure security both a socio-economic intervention and a governance reform (FAO, 2022; UN-Habitat, 2022). A comprehensive programme should focus on identifying, verifying, and documenting existing land rights through participatory planning, community mapping, cadastral surveys, and legally recognised tenure documents, while supporting in-situ upgrading rather than relocation (World Bank, 2020; UN-Habitat, 2020). Effective implementation requires stronger coordination among government institutions, transparent digital land information systems, and meaningful community participation to ensure inclusive recognition of land rights, particularly for women, youth, persons with disabilities, older residents, and low-income households (FAO, 2022; UN Women, 2023). Integrating tenure regularisation with economic development initiatives can support entrepreneurship, employment creation, municipal revenue generation, and progress toward Sustainable Development Goals 8 and 11, while also improving environmental management and climate resilience (United Nations, 2023; UN-Habitat, 2022). Addressing challenges such as limited institutional capacity, inadequate funding, outdated land records, political interference, and affordability requires simplified registration processes, financial support for vulnerable households, anti-corruption measures, technical partnerships, and the use of digital tools such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and integrated land information systems (World Bank, 2022; FAO, 2022).

I. Urban Infrastructure

Urban infrastructure is a critical foundation for sustainable economic development in Epworth, Zimbabwe, influencing livelihoods, investment, productivity, and social equity. As a rapidly growing peri-urban settlement in the Greater Harare metropolitan region, Epworth faces increasing pressure on infrastructure and municipal services due to population growth and urban expansion (ZIMSTAT, 2023). Challenges such as poor road networks, inadequate public transport, limited water and sanitation services, unreliable energy supply, weak waste management, and limited digital connectivity constrain economic opportunities and residents' quality of life (World Bank, 2022; UN-Habitat, 2022). Addressing these issues requires integrated infrastructure strategies that promote economic empowerment, environmental sustainability, and community participation. Investments in transport, water, sanitation, energy, and digital technologies can improve access to markets, employment, education, healthcare, and financial services while supporting small and medium-sized enterprises through increased productivity and reduced operational barriers (AfDB, 2023; World Bank, 2023). Sustainable approaches, including renewable energy, digital inclusion, climate-resilient planning, and responsible waste management, can enhance Epworth's resilience and support inclusive urban growth. Effective community engagement and public-private partnerships are also essential to ensure infrastructure projects meet local needs and achieve long-term sustainability (UNECA, 2023). Ultimately, strategic infrastructure investment can serve as a catalyst for inclusive economic transformation, improved livelihoods, enterprise development, and sustainable urban development aligned with Zimbabwe's national priorities and global development goals.

L. Entrepreneurship and SME Growth

Entrepreneurship and SME development are essential for sustainable economic transformation in Epworth, Zimbabwe, where unemployment, population growth, limited formal jobs, and reliance on informal livelihoods require a transition towards productive and growth-oriented enterprises (Munyoro et al., 2016; World Bank, 2022). A community-centred strategy should strengthen business skills, improve access to finance and markets, and integrate SMEs into wider economic systems in line with Zimbabwe's National Development Strategy 1, which promotes industrialisation, value addition, employment creation, and inclusive growth through sectors such as manufacturing, agro-processing, construction, recycling, digital services, retail, and creative industries (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020; MWACSMED, 2023). However, SME growth is limited by financial constraints, weak entrepreneurial capacity, regulatory challenges, inadequate infrastructure, and restricted market access (Mukorera, 2018; World Bank, 2022). Addressing these barriers requires collaborative entrepreneurial ecosystems involving government, community organisations, financial institutions, private-

sector actors, and development partners. Community entrepreneurship hubs can provide training, mentorship, digital skills, incubation support, and market linkages, while improved financial inclusion through savings groups, cooperative financing, microfinance, and digital financial services can enable enterprise expansion (ILO, 2023). Simplified formalisation processes, stronger value-chain partnerships, digital entrepreneurship, and sustainable practices such as recycling, renewable energy, and circular economy initiatives can further enhance SME competitiveness and support green economic transformation (UNCTAD, 2022; OECD, 2023; UNEP, 2023; Gunhidzirai, 2024). Overall, Epworth's entrepreneurship strategy should focus on skills development, inclusive finance, institutional support, market integration, digital innovation, and sustainability to promote employment creation, household resilience, and long-term local economic development (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020; World Bank, 2022).

M. Skills Development

Skills development is essential for sustainable economic development in Epworth, Zimbabwe, where high population density, youth unemployment, informal economic activities, and limited livelihood opportunities require targeted human capital interventions (ILO, 2022; ZIMSTAT, 2023). A community-centred approach should expand skills development beyond traditional vocational training by integrating technical skills, entrepreneurship, digital literacy, innovation, and locally relevant competencies to support inclusive economic transformation (Sen, 1999; UNDP, 2024). Accessible, demand-driven training systems, including TVET programmes, apprenticeships, internships, and enterprise development, should address local market needs in sectors such as construction, agro-processing, renewable energy, digital services, artisanal work, household services, and micro-manufacturing (World Bank, 2022; UNESCO, 2023). Entrepreneurship support should include mentorship, financial inclusion, and market linkages, while digital skills initiatives should promote technology access and online economic opportunities (IFC, 2022). Skills programmes must also prioritise inclusion of women, persons with disabilities, and vulnerable groups through flexible training options and targeted support (ILO, 2022). Strong partnerships among government, private sector, educational institutions, financial organisations, and communities can improve training relevance, create employment pathways, and promote enterprise growth (World Bank, 2023). Ultimately, Epworth's development depends on an integrated skills ecosystem that combines vocational education, entrepreneurship, digital inclusion, and community participation to strengthen innovation, resilience, and inclusive economic opportunities (UNDP, 2024).

N. Community Development

Community development is essential for sustainable economic development in Epworth, Zimbabwe, due to rapid urbanisation, high population density, informal socio-economic structures, and limited public infrastructure. Community-driven approaches empower residents to participate in decision-making, mobilise resources, and strengthen local institutions such as cooperatives, savings groups, and community organisations (World Bank, 2022; UN-Habitat, 2023). By supporting priorities such as informal enterprise development, skills training, infrastructure improvement, environmental management, and affordable housing, participatory approaches enhance ownership, accountability, and sustainability (UNDP, 2023). In Epworth, sustainable development should focus on inclusive governance, youth and women's empowerment, MSME growth, informal sector formalisation, digital entrepreneurship, vocational training, climate-resilient livelihoods, and partnerships among communities, government, civil society, and private actors. These interventions can strengthen resilience, reduce poverty, promote social cohesion, and support Zimbabwe's National Development Strategy 1 and Sustainable Development Goals (Government of Zimbabwe, 2021; United Nations, 2023).

O. Spatial Planning and Environmental Rehabilitation

Spatial planning and environmental rehabilitation are essential for promoting sustainable economic development in Epworth, Zimbabwe, where rapid urbanisation, informal settlement growth, inadequate infrastructure, and weak land-use management have contributed to environmental degradation, pressure on wetlands, and reduced economic productivity (UN-Habitat, 2022; World Bank, 2023). A policy and community-centred approach should focus on integrated spatial planning that formalises informal settlements, protects environmentally sensitive areas, improves land-use efficiency, and strengthens infrastructure provision to support investment, livelihoods, and enterprise development (Government of Zimbabwe, 2021; UN-Habitat, 2020). Collaboration among the Epworth Local Board, government agencies, the Environmental Management Agency (EMA), and communities is necessary to prevent settlement expansion into wetlands and other fragile ecosystems, while participatory tools such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS), community mapping, and inclusive land administration can improve tenure security, service delivery, and local decision-making (EMA, 2022; UN-Habitat, 2021). Environmental rehabilitation should complement these efforts through wetland restoration, improved solid waste management, climate resilience measures, and green economic initiatives such as recycling, afforestation, and ecosystem restoration projects (MECW, 2023; Ramsar, 2021). By strengthening environmental governance, promoting community participation, and integrating nature-based solutions into development planning, Epworth can achieve inclusive,

resilient, and sustainable economic growth aligned with Sustainable Development Goals 11 and 15, which promote sustainable cities and communities and the protection of terrestrial ecosystems (United Nations, 2023).

P. Governance and Institutional Collaboration

Effective governance and institutional collaboration are critical for sustainable economic development in Epworth, Zimbabwe, where socio-economic challenges, fragmented service delivery, informality, and rapid urbanisation require integrated approaches that promote transparency, accountability, policy coherence, and inclusive participation (UN-Habitat, 2022; World Bank, 2023). A collaborative governance framework involving government institutions, the Epworth Local Board, civil society, private sector, development partners, academic institutions, and communities can strengthen planning, resource mobilisation, service delivery, and policy implementation by combining financial, technical, and institutional resources (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). Partnerships with knowledge institutions and local stakeholders can enhance innovation, evidence-based policymaking, social capital, trust, and community ownership, while mechanisms such as multi-stakeholder forums, public-private partnerships, digital governance platforms, and community monitoring systems can improve accountability and reduce institutional fragmentation (OECD, 2020; Chikoto & Neely, 2022; UNDP, 2023). Such collaboration aligns with Sustainable Development Goals 16 and 17 by strengthening effective institutions, inclusive decision-making, and partnerships for sustainable development, ultimately supporting improved services, investment attraction, and long-term economic growth in Epworth (United Nations, 2023).

VI. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that sustainable economic development in Epworth requires an integrated, community-centred framework that addresses historical, institutional, spatial, and socio-economic factors shaping peri-urban transformation. The findings show that challenges such as poverty, inadequate infrastructure, informalisation, and insecure tenure are linked to deeper institutional legacies, including colonial planning systems, fragmented governance, and contested perceptions of informality. While formalisation, infrastructure investment, and market-based approaches remain important, they are insufficient without locally legitimate governance, community participation, and historically informed planning. Sustainable transformation depends on strengthening collaboration between state institutions and community actors, recognising social networks, historical memory, and informal economic practices as developmental assets. However, community initiatives must be supported by stronger institutional coordination, fiscal capacity, infrastructure investment, and access to finance. The study therefore proposes a co-produced governance model that integrates land tenure reform, inclusive spatial planning, infrastructure upgrading, entrepreneurship support, skills development, environmental rehabilitation, and institutional partnerships as interconnected strategies. The Epworth case demonstrates that peri-urban development is not only a technical process of settlement upgrading but also a socio-institutional process of rebuilding trust, enhancing local capabilities, and creating conditions for inclusive and sustainable growth across Zimbabwe and sub-Saharan Africa.

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