



Livelihood Displacement Under Agrarian Collapse: Informalisation, Asset Erosion and Institutional Failure in Zvishavane Rural District, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

The collapse of formal agriculture in Zvishavane Rural District has essentially reconfigured rural livelihood systems, pushing households to venture into informal and often precarious economic activities. The paper is fundamentally anchored in the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF). It sought to examine how agrarian decline, largely driven by land reform disruptions, macroeconomic instability, climate variability, and institutional weakening, has fast-tracked rural informalisation. This study employed the critical realism philosophy to explain the deep-seated structures and mechanisms driving the shift from formal agriculture to informal livelihoods. The abductive/retroductive approach complemented the philosophy whereby the authors moved between data and existing theory (SLF) to establish the most credible explanation for why informalisation in Zvishavane represents systemic livelihood displacement rather than a developmental transition. The study analysed livelihood pathways, asset dynamics, and the sustainability of informal activities using the mixed methods design combining household surveys ($n \approx 197$), key informant interviews, and focus group discussions. The findings reveal a marked shift from agriculture-based livelihoods towards artisanal and small-scale mining, informal trade, and natural-resource extraction. While these activities alleviate short-term income and food insecurity, they are predominantly coping-driven, characterised by asset erosion, ecological degradation, weak accumulation, and regulatory exclusion. Conceptually, the paper advances the SLF by theorising informalisation as a structurally induced process of livelihood displacement, sustained through asset erosion and predatory governance rather than adaptive diversification. The paper thus contributes to debates on rural transformation by demonstrating that informalisation in Zvishavane Rural reflects systemic livelihood displacement rather than a developmental transition. Policy responses must therefore move beyond livelihood promotion to address structural drivers of agrarian collapse, integrate informal livelihoods into rural development frameworks, and strengthen gender-responsive, climate-resilient agricultural and institutional systems.

Keywords: Informal economy, Agricultural collapse, Sustainable livelihoods, Rural Zimbabwe, Deagrarianisation, Artisanal Mining

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture has historically fortified rural economies across sub-Saharan Africa, serving as the primary source of food security, employment, and income for the majority of rural households (FAO, 2017; World Bank, 2020). In Zimbabwe, agriculture has traditionally played a pivotal role to rural livelihoods and national economic performance, contributing significantly to household welfare, agro-industrial linkages, and foreign-exchange earnings (Moyo, 2011; Scoones et al., 2018). A marked downward trend in Zimbabwe's agricultural sector's productivity, characterised by reduced yields, declining input access, recurrent climate shocks, and weakened institutional support systems was experienced since early 2000s. This deterioration has translated into chronic food insecurity and heightened income instability among rural households (Scoones et al., 2018; FAO, 2022), especially in Zvishavane Rural District of Midlands Province in Zimbabwe. The district falls within

Agroecological Regions IV and V, the driest parts of Zimbabwe, where low and erratic rainfall makes traditional farming challenging. Consequently, agricultural practices are heavily focused on climate-smart adaptation, drought resistance, and a strategic shift towards high-value crops and integrated farming. However, these initiatives are yet to be fully embraced and implemented on account of resource constraints.

Regionally, similar trends of agrarian stress have been observed across Southern Africa, where climate variability, land pressure, market liberalisation, and declining state investment have weakened smallholder agriculture (Bryceson, 2019; Jayne et al., 2014). Globally, these pressures have coincided with a broader process of rural livelihood diversification and de-agrarianisation, as households increasingly combine or abandon farming in favour of non-farm and informal activities to sustain livelihoods (Ellis, 2000; Rigg, 2006). In Africa, this shift has been particularly noticeable, with the informal economy accounting for more than 80 per cent of total employment, especially in rural and peri-urban areas (ILO, 2018).

In Zimbabwe, the narrowing of formal employment opportunities and declining agricultural viability have coincided with the rapid expansion of informal economic activities in rural areas. These include artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), cross-border trading, vending, informal transport services, and deepened natural resource extraction such as firewood sales and fishing (Makochekanwa, 2020; Mutemeri & Petersen, 2021). Policy and development discourse often frames the propagation of informal livelihoods as evidence of resilience, entrepreneurship, and adaptive capacity among rural populations. Relying solely on such narratives may obscure the structural constraints, precarity, and environmental degradation underpinning rural informalisation (Meagher, 2016; Scoones et al., 2020).

While a substantial body of literature dwelt on Zimbabwe's agrarian decline, land reform outcomes, and the growth of informal economies, there remains limited empirical understanding of how rural households actively reconfigure their livelihood portfolios in response to agrarian collapse. In particular, inadequate attention has been paid to the asset trade-offs entrenched in informal livelihood strategies, the long-term sustainability of these activities, and whether such shifts represent adaptive diversification or involuntary livelihood displacement (Bryceson, 2002; Dorward et al., 2009). Moreover, few studies employed an integrated mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative livelihood evidence with qualitative household-level narratives to examine how institutional failure, environmental degradation, and gendered vulnerabilities interact to shape informalisation processes in rural contexts (De Haan & Zoomers, 2005; Scoones, 2015).

This study sought to address these gaps by placing rural informalisation in Zvishavane Rural District within broader political-economic, institutional, and ecological contexts and by applying the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework to analyse household livelihood pathways, sustainability outcomes, and institutional dynamics. Resultantly, the study contributes to wider debates on de-agrarianisation, informality, and rural transformation in sub-Saharan Africa. By so doing the study demonstrate that informal livelihoods in rural Zimbabwe often emerge not as linear developmental transitions, but as survivalist responses rooted in structural vulnerability, declining agrarian viability, and uneven access to assets and institutions.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is mainly guided by the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), which expounds livelihoods as the capabilities, assets, and activities required for a means of living (Chambers and Conway, 1992; Scoones, 2015). In a nutshell the framework identifies five forms of capital; natural, human, financial, physical, and social, operating within a vulnerability context shaped by shocks, trends, and seasonality, and mediated by transforming structures and processes such as policies, institutions, and governance arrangements (Scoones, 1998; DFID, 1999). The SLF is principally useful for analysing rural livelihoods under stress because it integrates material conditions with institutional and contextual dynamics. In this study, agricultural collapse is conceptualised as a systemic shock that simultaneously erodes multiple livelihood assets, including natural capital through declining land productivity, financial capital through falling farm incomes, and institutional support through weakened extension, credit, and marketing systems. As agricultural viability weakens, rural households move labour and resources toward informal economic activities such as artisanal mining, informal trade, and natural-resource extraction. Within the conventional SLF interpretation, such diversification is often treated as an adaptive response aimed at enhancing resilience. Conversely, sustainability within the SLF requires that livelihood

strategies maintain or enhance asset bases without undermining future livelihood options or intergenerational wellbeing (Scoones, 2015). On the basis of this principle, the study interrogates whether informal livelihoods in Zvishavane Rural District contribute to asset accumulation or instead generate cumulative asset erosion through environmental degradation, income volatility, and regulatory exclusion. This study thus extends the SLF by theorising informal livelihoods not as adaptive strategies within the framework, but as outcomes of institutional blockage that actively erode asset portfolios and shut out positive livelihoods' paths. By foregrounding institutional failure, predatory governance, and unequal power relations, the framework is employed to analyse informalisation as a process of structurally induced livelihood displacement rather than a neutral or successful adaptation. This conceptualisation enables a more critical assessment of sustainability, moving beyond short term coping outcomes to examine long-term livelihood viability and transformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews literature on agricultural decline, de-agrarianisation, informalisation, and sustainability in rural Zimbabwe and the wider sub-Saharan African context. It critically synthesises empirical and theoretical contributions to demonstrate that while agrarian decline and informal livelihood expansion are well documented, existing studies provide limited integrated analysis of how these processes interact at the household level, particularly in relation to asset trade-offs, institutional dynamics, and differentiated social outcomes. The review is structured around four thematic areas, agricultural decline, de-agrarianisation and informalisation, sustainability and gender dimensions, and the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), which anchors the analysis in this study.

Agricultural Decline in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe's agricultural decline is widely attributed to the interaction of structural, institutional and environmental factors rather than to a single policy failure (Moyo, 2011; Scoones et al., 2018). The Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) fundamentally reconfigured agrarian relations by redistributing land to historically marginalised populations, but it simultaneously disrupted established systems of finance, input supply, extension services and market access (Moyo, 2011; Scoones et al., 2019). Empirical evidence shows that while a minority of resettled farmers achieved modest productivity gains, the majority faced declining yields due to limited capital, insecure tenure arrangements and inadequate state support (Scoones et al., 2019; Mutiro et al., 2022). Macroeconomic instability has deepened agrarian challenges by undermining agricultural investment and planning horizons (Ncube and Tregenna, 2020). Persistent inflation, currency volatility and foreign exchange shortages have constrained farmers' access to fertiliser, fuel, machinery and improved seed, rendering agriculture increasingly risky for smallholder households (FAO, 2021; Scoones, 2015). The weakening of public agricultural institutions, particularly extension services and marketing boards, has further eroded farmers' adaptive capacity and reduced opportunities for commercialisation (Scoones, 2015; Mutiro et al., 2022). Climate variability has intensified these structural constraints, particularly in semi-arid regions of Zimbabwe characterised by erratic rainfall and recurrent droughts (IPCC, 2023). Studies document declining maize yields, increased crop failure and reluctant shifts towards drought-tolerant small grains, often constrained by labour intensity and weak processing markets (FAO, 2021; Mutiro et al., 2022). Essentially, this body of literature reveals that agrarian decline in Zimbabwe has been systemic and cumulative, transforming agriculture from a basis for accumulation into a high-risk subsistence activity and laying the foundation for extensive livelihood displacement.

De-agrarianisation and Informalisation

De-agrarianisation refers to the declining importance of agriculture as the primary basis of rural livelihoods and identities (Bryceson, 2019). Across sub-Saharan Africa, this process has been associated with diversification into non-farm activities, including trade, wage labour and small-scale enterprise (Ellis, 2000; Bryceson, 2019). In contexts characterised by structural transformation, de-agrarianisation has been accompanied by industrial absorption of rural labour and rising productivity (Rigg et al., 2020). Zimbabwe's experience deviates sharply from this trajectory. Empirical studies demonstrate that de-agrarianisation has unfolded in the absence of industrial growth, resulting in widespread informalisation rather than productive diversification (Ncube and Tregenna, 2020; Mkodzongi and Lawrence, 2019). Informal livelihoods such as artisanal mining, vending and cross-border trading have expanded primarily as coping responses to agrarian collapse and economic contraction, rather than as pathways to accumulation (Mkodzongi and Spiegel, 2019; Bryceson, 2019). This pattern reflects

what scholars describe as ‘distress diversification’, whereby households diversify to survive rather than to accumulate assets (Ellis, 2000; Bryceson, 2019). Research on Zimbabwean rural economies further indicates that informalisation is characterised by low productivity, income volatility and regulatory exclusion, limiting prospects for sustainable livelihood improvement (Ncube and Tregenna, 2020; Mkodzongi and Spiegel, 2019). This study builds on this literature by arguing that informalisation in rural Zvishavane should be understood not merely as an economic response but as a structural outcome of agrarian collapse and institutional failure.

Sustainability and Gender Dimensions of Informal Livelihoods

The sustainability implications of informal livelihoods have received growing scholarly attention. Environmental studies document extensive ecological degradation associated with artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), including land scarring, deforestation and river pollution (Spiegel, 2017; Mutiro et al., 2022). Such degradation weakens natural capital and compromises future livelihood options for rural communities (Scoones, 2015; Spiegel, 2017). Gendered analysis reveals that the costs of informalisation are unevenly distributed. Women frequently bear disproportionate burdens through increased unpaid labour, caregiving responsibilities and exposure to precarious income-generating activities (Chant and Sweetman, 2012; Mutiro et al., 2022). Studies in Zimbabwe show that women’s participation in informal trade and mining is mediated by gendered power relations, limited asset ownership and heightened vulnerability to exploitation (Mkodzongi and Spiegel, 2019; Mutiro et al., 2022). Youth are similarly affected, with informal livelihoods constraining skills development and reinforcing intergenerational poverty (Bryceson, 2019). These findings suggest that informalisation cannot be assessed solely in income terms but must be evaluated through sustainability and equity lenses that account for environmental degradation, gendered labour burdens and long-term human capital erosion.

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF)

The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) provides a comprehensive analytical tool for exploring how households combine assets, institutions and strategies within a given vulnerability context (Scoones, 1998; DFID, 1999). The framework conceptualises livelihoods as shaped by five forms of capital—natural, financial, human, social and physical, mediated by transforming structures and processes such as policies, institutions and governance systems (Scoones, 1998).

Many scholars argue that the SLF is particularly well suited to analysing rural livelihoods in crisis contexts because it captures both material conditions and institutional dynamics (Scoones, 2015). In Zimbabwe, the SLF has been widely applied to assess agrarian change, climate adaptation and livelihood diversification (Mkodzongi and Lawrence, 2019; Mutiro et al., 2022). However, critics note that the framework can underplay power relations and political economy unless these dimensions are explicitly integrated into analysis (De Haan and Zoomers, 2005; Scoones, 2015). This study adopts the SLF while explicitly foregrounding institutional failure, predatory governance and asset trade-offs, thereby extending the framework’s analytical utility. In doing so, it situates informal livelihoods within broader structural constraints rather than treating them as isolated household choices or adaptive successes.

Positioning the Study

Collectively, existing studies largely treat rural informalisation in Zimbabwe and sub-Saharan Africa as a form of livelihood diversification, often implicitly framed as adaptive resilience or entrepreneurial response to agrarian stress (Ellis, 2000; Bryceson, 2019; Scoones, 2015). While the literature convincingly documents the expansion of informal activities and their short-term income effects, it tends to assume that diversification itself signals agency and adjustment, rather than interrogating the structural conditions under which such diversification occurs. In addition, few studies systematically scrutinise the asset trade-offs embedded in informal livelihood strategies, or how institutional failure, regulatory exclusion, and predatory governance actively reproduce vulnerability over time, particularly at the household level and across social groups. This study departs from these approaches by conceptualising informalisation not as adaptive diversification but as a process of structurally induced livelihood displacement arising from cumulative agrarian collapse. By integrating quantitative evidence on livelihood portfolios with qualitative accounts of institutional interaction, asset erosion, and gendered vulnerability, the paper reveals how informal livelihoods simultaneously sustain short-term



survival while foreclosing long-term livelihood recovery. In doing so, the study extends the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework by explicitly foregrounding power, institutions, and asset erosion, thereby offering a more politically grounded explanation of rural informalisation under conditions of agrarian decline.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the research philosophy, research approach, research design, data collection methods, and analytical procedures employed to investigate rural livelihood transformations in the context of agricultural decline in Zvishavane Rural District, Zimbabwe. The methodological approach was designed to capture both the structural patterns of livelihood change and the lived experiences through which households navigate agrarian collapse and informalisation. Given the study's grounding in the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), the methodology prioritised an integrated analysis of assets, vulnerability contexts, and institutional processes shaping livelihood outcomes.

Research Philosophy and Research Approach

This study employed the critical realism philosophy, as articulated by Roy Bhaskar, to explain the deep-seated structures and mechanisms driving the shift from formal agriculture to informal livelihoods in Zvishavane Rural District (Natarajan et al. 2022). Critical realism provides a robust ontological framework for understanding complex phenomena by introducing a stratified ontology that recognises distinct layers of reality: the empirical (observable experiences), the actual (events that occur), and the real (underlying structures and mechanisms with causal powers). The abductive/retroductive approach complemented this philosophical foundation. Abduction involves reasoning from observed effects to postulated causes, moving between data and existing theory to construct the most plausible explanation for phenomena (Jupp, D., & Barnett, C. (2018) In this study, the authors moved between empirical data collected through household surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions, and existing theory (the SLF and critical realist ontology) to establish the most credible explanation for why informalisation in Zvishavane represents systemic livelihood displacement rather than a developmental transition. The approach was operationalised using the mixed methods research design.

Research Design

The mixed-methods research design was adopted, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine rural livelihood transformations under conditions of agricultural decline. This design was selected in recognition of the complex and multidimensional nature of livelihoods, which encompass measurable material outcomes such as income sources, asset ownership, and livelihood portfolio as well as subjective experiences, perceptions, and social relations (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative methods enabled the identification of dominant livelihood strategies and the extent of de-agrarianisation across households, while qualitative methods provided contextual depth by enlightening how households interpret agricultural decline, engage with informal economies, and negotiate institutional constraints. The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods facilitated methodological triangulation, enhancing the credibility and validity of findings through the cross verification of evidence from multiple sources (Denzin, 2012). This mixed-methods approach is particularly well suited to the SLF, which emphasises the interaction between assets, vulnerability contexts, and transforming structures. Through combining numerical indicators with lived experiences, the study operationalised the SLF holistically and avoided the limitations of single-method approaches that may obscure either structural patterns or social meaning (Scoones, 2015).

Data Collection Methods

Quantitative data were collected through structured household surveys administered to 197 households of Zvishavane Rural District, Zimbabwe. This sample size was considered sufficient to capture dominant livelihood patterns and variations within the study area while remaining feasible given logistical and resource constraints common to rural fieldwork. The final analytic sample ranged from 192 to 197 households depending on variable completeness, with minor variations due to item non-response on specific questions. Similar sample sizes have been widely employed in rural livelihoods studies to generate robust descriptive insights and support inferential analysis where appropriate (Ellis, 2000; Scoones, 2015). The survey captured demographic characteristics,

livelihood portfolios, income sources, agricultural production, asset ownership, saving patterns and exposure to economic and climatic shocks. Household surveys were selected because they enable systematic measurement of livelihood variables across a relatively large sample, facilitating comparison across households and the identification of patterns of livelihood diversification and dependence (Ellis, 2000). The survey instrument was designed to capture both agricultural and non-agricultural activities, reflecting the study's focus on rural informalisation and livelihood diversification. This method is widely employed in rural livelihoods research due to its capacity to generate comparable and replicable data while remaining sensitive to local livelihood complexity (Scoones, 2015). Qualitative data were generated through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). KIIs were conducted with 15 community leaders, informal-economy actors that included artisanal miners and traders and officials from agricultural and development institutions. These interviews were selected to provide expert and experiential insights into institutional dynamics, regulatory environments, and historical livelihood changes that are not easily captured through surveys alone (Yin, 2018). KIIs enabled the study to interrogate governance gaps, power relations, and policy implementation challenges, offering an institutional perspective critical for understanding livelihood sustainability. Six focus group discussions were employed, each comprising 8-12 participants, to explore collective livelihood experiences, social norms, gender relations, and seasonal livelihood dynamics. FGDs were particularly useful for examining shared coping strategies and community-level responses to agricultural decline, as well as for capturing intrahousehold and gendered dimensions of informal livelihoods. The interactive nature of FGDs facilitated the emergence of consensus and divergence in livelihood narratives, enriching the analysis of social processes underlying livelihood change (Krueger and Casey, 2015). All participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and confidentiality and anonymity were assured to minimise potential risks to participants.

Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques to identify patterns of livelihood diversification, income dependency, and the relative contribution of agriculture and informal activities to household livelihoods. Descriptive analysis was appropriate given the study's exploratory and explanatory objectives, which focused on mapping livelihood structures rather than testing causal hypotheses. This approach enabled the identification of dominant livelihood pathways and degrees of de-agrarianisation across the study area. In addition, logistic regression analysis was employed to examine the association between household characteristics, asset endowments, and the likelihood of engagement in informal livelihood activities. Logistic regression was appropriate given the binary nature of key outcome variables (e.g. participation in informal livelihoods) and its capacity to estimate the probability of engagement while controlling for multiple explanatory factors. Odds ratios are presented with 95% confidence to indicate precision and enable assessment of uncertainty. This analysis strengthened the quantitative component by moving beyond description to assess patterned relationships within the data. Qualitative data from KIIs and FGDs were analysed using thematic analysis, allowing for the systematic identification of recurring themes related to vulnerability, sustainability, institutional interaction, and gender dynamics (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This analytical approach facilitated the interpretation of meaning, context, and processes underlying observed livelihood patterns, complementing the statistical findings. Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred at the interpretation stage, enabling the study to corroborate statistical trends with narrative evidence. This integrative analytic strategy strengthened the robustness of conclusions and ensured coherence between empirical findings and the conceptual assumptions of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework.

FINDINGS

This section presents the key empirical findings in a selective and analytical manner. The findings highlight dominant patterns, explain their significance using the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), and substantiate claims with quantitative evidence and illustrative qualitative quotations.

Pattern 1: Accelerated De-agrarianisation and Livelihood Displacement

Rural livelihoods have undergone a decisive shift away from agriculture, not as a strategy of choice but as a response to declining agricultural viability. Results of the survey data (n=197) indicate a sharp decline in reliance on crop farming as a primary livelihood source, falling from 62.4% five years ago to 28.7% at present, while

engagement in artisanal mining rose from 7.6% to 31.5% and informal trading from 9.8% to 21.4%. Crop yields have declined significantly, with maize yields falling by 56.7% and millet by 63.5% over the same period (paired t -test: $t = 8.94$, $p < .001$), confirming severe erosion of natural capital.

As one Village Head explained, *“Ten to fifteen years ago, most households survived mainly from farming... Today, very few households rely on farming alone. Most depend on gold panning, trading, or remittances.”*

Within the SLF, these findings indicate livelihood displacement driven by the combined erosion of natural, financial and institutional capital, rather than gradual diversification. This pattern confirms that livelihood shifts are involuntary responses to systemic agrarian failure rather than strategic diversification.

Pattern 2: Expansion of Informal Livelihoods as Distress Diversification

Informal economic activities function primarily as survival strategies rather than pathways to accumulation. Over 60% of surveyed households participate in at least one informal activity, with informal mining accounting for 34.6% of household income on average and informal trading for 26.8%, compared to only 21.4% from agriculture. Logistic regression results ($n=194$) show that crop failure (*Odds Ratio*= 2.39, 95% CI: 1.68-3.41, $p < .001$) and youth-headed households (*Odds Ratio* = 2.10, 95% CI:1.32-3.34, $p = .001$) significantly increase the likelihood of informal economy engagement, while access to credit reduces it (*Odds Ratio* = 0.54, 95% CI: 0.37-0.79, $p = .002$).

An artisanal mining leader stated, *“It was not my first choice, but hunger forced us. Farming failed us, and there are no jobs.”*

These results align with the SLF distinction between adaptive diversification and distress-driven diversification, with the evidence strongly supporting the latter. Informal livelihoods emerge primarily as coping mechanisms triggered by asset shocks rather than opportunity-led livelihood choices.

Pattern 3: Asset Trade-offs and Unsustainable Livelihood Pathways

Informal livelihoods generate short-term financial capital at the expense of long-term sustainability. A substantial eighty-one per cent of households ($n=197$) are net food purchasers, indicating weakened livelihood outcomes despite continued land access. Only 23% of households reported any savings in the past year, and among those engaged in informal mining, the median savings amount was just US\$45 over the previous 12 months. Livestock ownership, a key indicator of rural asset accumulation declined by 34% over the five-year recall period, with cattle ownership falling from average of 6 head per household to 2 head. Regression analysis shows that increased informal work intensity significantly reduces agricultural productivity ($\beta = -0.29$, 95% CI:-0.48 to 0.10, $p = .004$), reinforcing livelihood displacement.

A Ward Councillor reported, *“Farming today is unpredictable... Even hardworking farmers fail because the system does not fully support them.”*

From an SLF perspective, this reflects negative feedback loops in which coping strategies undermine the asset bases required for future resilience. Short-term survival strategies actively erode productive assets, locking households into unsustainable livelihood trajectories.

Pattern 4: Institutional Failure and Predatory Governance

Transforming structures constrain rather than enable sustainable livelihoods. Sixty-three per cent of households ($n=192$) reported police harassment or confiscation, and 58.7% ($n=192$) reported informal payments or bribes, indicating pervasive institutional extraction.

One miner observed, *“Police are our biggest cost... There is no protection, only punishment.”*

These findings demonstrate that vulnerability is actively reproduced through governance practices rather than alleviated by institutional support. Institutional failure functions as a structural mechanism that reproduces informality and entrenches livelihood vulnerability.

Pattern 5: Gendered and Intergenerational Differentiation of Livelihood Impacts

Livelihood displacement produces uneven outcomes across gender and age groups. Gender-disaggregated data (n=197) show that 70.9% of women are concentrated in informal trading compared to 29.1% of men, while 68.3% of ASM participants are male ($\chi^2 = 26.4, p < .001$). Youth-headed households are significantly more likely to engage in informal livelihoods (OR=2.10, 95% CI: 1.32-3.34, $p=.001$).

As one participant explained, “*Mining teaches fast money, but not life skills... We fear our children will not finish school.*”

Within the SLF, these differentiated impacts point to erosion of human capital and heightened intergenerational risk. Livelihood displacement is socially differentiated, reinforcing gendered labour burdens and intergenerational vulnerability.

The findings collectively demonstrate a coherent pattern of livelihood displacement characterised by agrarian collapse, distress-driven informalisation, asset erosion and institutional failure. While informal livelihoods enable short-term coping, they lock households into a precarious equilibrium of survival without resilience.

Integrated Synthesis of Findings

The findings reveal a consistent pattern of livelihood displacement rather than adaptive diversification across the study area. Survey data show a pronounced decline in agriculture as a primary livelihood source, with most households now dependent on artisanal and small-scale mining, informal trade, vending, and natural-resource extraction. Qualitative evidence confirms that this shift is driven not by opportunity or accumulation potential, but by the collapse of agriculture as a viable livelihood base, attributed to climatic shocks, high input costs, institutional withdrawal, and market failures. This displacement initiates a distress-led informalisation mechanism in which households exit agriculture under compulsion rather than choice. While informal livelihoods provide short-term income and food access, they generate a negative asset feedback loop. Quantitative evidence indicates irregular earnings and limited savings capacity—only 23% of households reported any savings in the past year, while qualitative accounts highlight injuries, school dropouts, and declining investment in farming assets. Livestock ownership declined by 34% over five years, further confirming asset erosion. Informal activities thus stabilise immediate consumption but undermine financial and human capital accumulation, reinforcing dependence on low-return livelihoods.

Asset erosion is further enlarged through environmental degradation. Evidence from key informants and focus groups points to land scarring, deforestation, and river pollution associated with artisanal mining and unsustainable resource extraction. This degradation of natural capital constrains future agricultural recovery, closing off exit options from informal livelihoods and deepening structural vulnerability.

Institutional dynamics reproduce this precarious equilibrium. Respondents consistently describe regulatory enforcement as fragmented and predatory, characterised by harassment, informal taxation, and exclusion from formal support systems. Survey data corroborate these accounts, showing minimal access to credit, extension services, or social protection among households reliant on informal livelihoods. This institutional blockage prevents asset rebuilding and livelihood upgrading, locking households into stagnation.

The impacts of this process are socially differentiated. Women bear disproportionate burdens through unpaid labour, insecure trading conditions, and limited asset control, while youth engagement in informal livelihoods constrains skills development and reinforces intergenerational poverty. These dynamics indicate that informalisation reproduces social vulnerability even as it sustains household survival.

In a nutshell, the findings demonstrate that rural informalisation in Rural Zvishavane constitutes a low-level livelihood equilibrium characterised by displacement, distress-driven informalisation, asset erosion, and institutional reproduction of vulnerability. Informal livelihoods prevent immediate destitution but foreclose pathways to resilience, providing the empirical basis for the subsequent discussion on why policy responses have failed to reverse distress-led informalisation.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to examine how rural households navigate livelihood pressures arising from agrarian decline, economic instability, and institutional failure in Zimbabwe. Interpreted through the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), the findings demonstrate that the expansion of informal livelihoods reflects a process of livelihood displacement rather than voluntary diversification. This discussion situates the empirical results within the broader literature on de-agrarianisation, informalisation, and sustainability, while highlighting the political-economic dynamics shaping rural livelihoods in Zvishavane Rural District. Drawing on the critical realism philosophy that underpinned this study, the discussion also connects observed patterns (empirical level) to the events (actual level) and the underlying structures and mechanisms (real level) that generate livelihood displacement.

Informalisation as Livelihood Displacement

Consistent with the literature on distress-driven diversification, the findings show that households' movement into artisanal mining, informal trade, and casual labour is primarily a response to declining agricultural viability rather than entrepreneurial opportunity (Ellis, 2000; Bryceson, 2019). Quantitative evidence of declining reliance on crop production, combined with qualitative accounts of rising input costs and climatic uncertainty, mirrors national and regional studies documenting agrarian collapse in Zimbabwe (Scoones et al., 2018; Ncube and Tregenna, 2020). This confirms that de-agrarianisation in Zvishavane is unfolding without structural transformation, reinforcing patterns of low productivity and precarious livelihoods identified elsewhere in Sub Saharan Africa (Bryceson, 2019; Rigg et al., 2020). Unlike contexts where non-farm livelihoods facilitate accumulation, the informal activities observed in this study function primarily as survival strategies. This finding extends existing scholarship by demonstrating how informalisation operates as a coping response rooted within structural vulnerability rather than as a pathway to socio-economic mobility (Mkodzongi and Spiegel, 2019). The evidence therefore challenges policy narratives that frame informal economies as engines of rural development.

From a critical realist perspective, the empirical observation of increased informal activity is generated by deeper structural mechanisms, the systematic collapse of agricultural support institutions, the political economy of land reform that created new vulnerabilities, and the historical legacy of uneven development in semi-arid regions. These mechanisms, rather individual choice or entrepreneurial agency, constitute the primary driver of livelihood displacement.

Asset Trade-offs and Unsustainable Livelihood Pathways

Applying the SLF highlights the asset trade-offs inherent in informal livelihood strategies. While households generate short-term financial capital through informal activities, this occurs at the expense of natural, human, and social capital. Environmental degradation associated with artisanal and small-scale mining, including land degradation and water pollution, corroborates studies documenting the ecological costs of informal extraction in Zimbabwe (Spiegel, 2017; Mutiro et al., 2022). These processes undermine future livelihood options, confirming arguments that informalisation often erodes rather than builds asset bases (Scoones, 2015). The quantitative evidence on savings rates (only 23% reporting any savings) and livestock decline (34% reduction over five years) provides measures of asset erosion that complement qualitative accounts. Human capital erosion is evident in occupational injuries, school dropouts, and heightened intergenerational risk, echoing findings from rural livelihood studies across Southern Africa (Bryceson, 2019). Social capital, while partially mobilised through informal networks, remains weakly institutionalised and unable to provide effective protection against shocks. This supports critiques of overly optimistic interpretations of social capital within the SLF when power asymmetries and regulatory exclusion persist (De Haan and Zoomers, 2005).

Institutional Failure and Predatory Governance

A fundamental contribution of this study lies in demonstrating the role of institutional failure and predatory governance in shaping livelihood outcomes. Rather than facilitating adaptation, transforming structures such as regulatory agencies and local authorities are perceived as extractive and inconsistent. This finding aligns with

political economy analysis showing that state–informal sector relations in Zimbabwe are characterised by rent-seeking, harassment, and selective enforcement (Mkodzongi and Lawrence, 2019; Ncube and Tregenna, 2020). Basing institutional dynamics on the SLF, the study responds directly to critiques that the framework underplays power relations (Scoones, 2015). The evidence indicates that vulnerability is not merely produced by environmental or market shocks but is actively reproduced through governance practices that block accumulation and formalization. The finding that 63% of households reported police harassment and 58.7% reported informal payments quantifies the extent of this institutional extraction. At the real level, these governance practices are generated by deeper structures; the local state's fiscal crisis, politicised enforcement, and patron-client relations that extract surplus without providing protection

Gendered and Intergenerational Implications

The findings further reveal that livelihood displacement has differentiated gender and generational effects. Women's increased participation in informal trade and mining is accompanied by heightened exposure to risky work, unpaid care burdens, and exploitation, reinforcing gendered inequalities documented in the literature (Chant and Sweetman, 2012; Mutiro et al., 2022). The concentration of women in informal trading (70.9%) versus men's dominance in ASM (68.3%) reflects and reproduces gendered divisions of labour and asset control. In the same vein, youth engagement in informal livelihoods reflects constrained opportunity structures rather than choice, with long-term implications for skills development and social mobility (Bryceson, 2019). These differentiated outcomes underscore the importance of integrating equity considerations into livelihood analysis and policy design. Without addressing structural and institutional constraints, informal livelihoods risk entrenching intergenerational poverty rather than offering pathways to resilience.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to theory by reframing rural informalisation as a process of structurally induced livelihood displacement rather than adaptive diversification. In contrast to resilience narratives that emphasise agency and flexibility, the findings demonstrate that livelihood shifts occur under conditions of compulsion, where households exit agriculture due to systemic failure rather than strategic choice. Informal livelihoods, in this context, reflect constrained adaptation within shrinking opportunity spaces rather than evidence of resilience.

The findings also challenge entrepreneurship-focused interpretations of informality that portray informal activities as latent engines of growth or innovation. Instead, the evidence shows that informalisation in Zvishavane Rural District is characterised by low accumulation potential, asset erosion, and institutional exclusion, limiting prospects for upward mobility. This suggests that entrepreneurship frameworks risk misdiagnosing survivalist activity as developmental dynamism.

Finally, the study extends the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework by demonstrating how institutional failure and predatory governance actively reproduce vulnerability, transforming informal livelihoods into mechanisms of entrapment rather than transition. Through integrating political–economic dynamics into the SLF, the analysis offers a more critical and context-sensitive understanding of informalisation under agrarian collapse, with implications for livelihood theory beyond Zimbabwe. The critical realist foundation enables this extension by directing analytical attention to the underlying structures and mechanisms, the real level that generates observed patterns of livelihood change.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study examined how agricultural decline has reshaped rural livelihood systems in Zvishavane Rural District and assessed whether the expansion of informal economic activities represents adaptive diversification or a survivalist response. Drawing on the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) and mixed-methods evidence from 197 households, the study demonstrates that rural informalisation is best understood as a process of structural livelihood displacement rather than entrepreneurial or developmental transition.



Theoretical Contribution

Conceptually, the study advances the SLF by reframing informal livelihoods not as adaptive strategies within a diversified livelihood portfolio, but as outcomes of systemic agrarian collapse and institutional obstruction. The findings show that informalisation in this context is sustained through asset erosion, ecological degradation, and predatory governance, which collectively bar positive livelihood trajectories. By foregrounding power relations and institutional dynamics, the study responds to critiques that the SLF insufficiently captures how vulnerability is actively reproduced through governance failures. In doing so, it challenges resilience, entrepreneurship, and adaptive diversification narratives that implicitly assume expanding opportunity spaces under informality.

Empirical Contribution

Empirically, the study provides robust mixed-methods evidence from Zvishavane Rural District demonstrating how households have shifted away from agriculture toward artisanal and small-scale mining, informal trade, vending, and natural-resource extraction primarily as coping responses. Quantitative findings confirm declining agricultural income shares and limited accumulation, while qualitative evidence captures lived experiences of involuntary livelihood displacement, only 23% of households reported any savings in the past year, livestock ownership declined by 34% over five years and regression analysis demonstrates the crop failure (OR=2.39, 95% CI: 1.68-3.41) and youth headed households (OR=2.10, 95% CI:1.32-3.34) significantly predict informal economy engagement. Qualitative evidence captures lived experiences of involuntary livelihood displacement, income volatility, and institutional exclusion. Combined, these findings show that informal livelihoods simultaneously sustain short-term survival and reproduce long-term vulnerability, producing a precarious equilibrium of economic activity without resilience.

Policy Implications

The findings have important implications for rural development policy in contexts experiencing agrarian collapse.

Revitalise Climate-Resilient Smallholder Agriculture

Reducing distress-driven informalisation requires restoring agriculture as a viable livelihood base. Targeted investment in climate-smart agriculture, irrigation, robust extension services, and affordable input systems is crucial, particularly in semi-arid regions. Strengthening agricultural institutions would rebuild productive assets and reduce forced livelihood displacement.

Integrate Informal Livelihoods into Rural Development Planning.

Informal livelihoods should be formally recognised within rural development frameworks rather than treated as temporary or illegal activities. Policies must acknowledge their survival function while addressing the structural constraints that limit sustainability and accumulation.

Implement Protective and Light-Touch Formalisation of Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining.

Regulatory approaches to ASM should prioritise occupational safety, environmental protection, and market access over punitive enforcement. Simplified licensing, community-based monitoring, and environmental rehabilitation mechanisms can reduce predatory governance and ecological degradation.

Adopt Gender-Responsive and Youth-Focused Livelihood Interventions

Policy responses must address the gendered and intergenerational dimensions of informalisation by improving women's access to productive assets, finance, and skills training, while reducing unpaid care burdens. Youth focused programmes should prioritise skills development and education retention to prevent long-term human capital erosion.



Strengthen Local Institutions and Governance Coordination.

Improved coordination among agricultural, environmental, and local governance institutions is critical to reducing regulatory fragmentation and rent-seeking. Asset-sensitive and inclusive governance structures are essential for enabling sustainable livelihood pathways.

Study Limitations and Mitigation Strategies

This study acknowledges encountered methodological limitations and the strategies employed to mitigate their effects. The cross-sectional design captures livelihood patterns at a single point, limiting causal inference and analysis of long-term dynamics. As a measure to mitigate this, the survey incorporated retrospective questions documenting changes over five years, complemented by qualitative life histories and seasonal calendars that reconstructed livelihood trajectories and identified critical turning points. On another note, recall bias may affect retrospective data accuracy. In the study this was minimized through carefully structured questions focused on major, easily recalled events (livestock losses, crop failure), triangulation with key informant narratives, and collective verification through focus group discussions. The geographic scope, confined to one district, usually limits statistical generalizability. However, Zvishavane was purposively selected as a typical semi-arid district representing Agro-ecological Regions IV and V, which cover much of rural Zimbabwe. The mixed-methods approach prioritises analytical generalizability, offering conceptual insights applicable to similar contexts across sub-Saharan Africa. The absence of true longitudinal data prevents precise tracking of household trajectories. The study combined retrospective surveys with qualitative life histories and seasonal calendars to reconstruct livelihood pathways and temporal dynamics. The sample size of 197 households, while adequate for descriptive and basic inferential analysis, constrains complex multivariate modelling. In order to maximise analytical value, purposive sampling ensured representation of key household types, while qualitative data explored differentiated experiences across gender, age, and livelihood groups. The focus on household-level dynamics may underplay intra-household inequalities. Mitigation strategies included gender-disaggregated survey modules, separate men's and women's focus groups, and qualitative exploration of intra-household decision-making and resource allocation.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs, expand geographic coverage, and incorporate finer-grained intra-household data collection to further illuminate the dynamics of livelihood displacement.

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