S. Afr. J. Agric. Ext.
Vol. 54 No. 6, 2026: 130-154
10.17159/2413-3221/2026/v54n6a21439

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Navigating Challenges in Rural Agriculture: A Study of Network Governance and Smallholder Farming in KwaZulu-Natal

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ABSTRACT

Smallholder farming is crucial for the country's food security, yet weak institutional support has hindered progress. Smallholder farmers face challenges, including climate change, market instability, and worsening rural poverty. A holistic approach involving problem-solving and coordination among social partners is essential. This study examines the potential of network governance for smallholder farming and identifies actors and their relationships that promote its development. This study examines network governance to advance smallholder farming in three local municipalities within the Harry Gwala District of KwaZulu-Natal. The study's target group consisted of 20 experienced smallholder farmers, 10 focus group participants and 4 traditional leaders, all purposively selected from the UMzimkhulu, Dr Nkosana Dlamini-Zuma, and Ubuhlebezwe areas. The qualitative research approach, which allows the gathering of in-depth perceptions from participants, was employed. Data collection instruments included interviews and focus group discussions, and the qualitative data were analysed narratively. The study reveals that stakeholders, including government bodies and farmer organisations, uniquely support grassroots farmers. However, unethical practices, a lack of collaboration, and weak connections hinder the efficiency of networking and smallholder production efforts. The study emphasises the importance of network governance in promoting stakeholder engagement and policy credibility. The findings provide insights for policymakers, stakeholders, and development practitioners focusing on sustainable rural development and

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poverty reduction in South Africa. Engaging a diverse range of actors, like the government sector, private sector entities, community groups, and non-governmental organisations, among others, in the agricultural value chain is crucial for enhancing the resilience and growth of smallholder farmers.

Keywords: Network Governance, Smallholder Farming, Collaborative Management, Rural Development, South Africa.

1. INTRODUCTION

Smallholder farmers are individuals whose scale of operations is considered insufficient to attract the services needed to significantly enhance their productivity (Carelsen *et al*., 2021). Nevertheless, the contribution of smallholder farming to Africa's development is substantial, particularly owing to its evident role in the agricultural sector (Kamara *et al*., 2019). Smallholder farming is recognised for its instrumental role in alleviating poverty and driving economic growth in Africa (Thamaga-Chitja & Morojele, 2014). As evidenced in many African nations, smallholder farming helps in eradicating hunger in rural communities and supports efforts to improve food security (Nchanji & Lutomia, 2021; Fan & Rue, 2020). Despite yielding a modest income, smallholder farming has remained the primary source of employment (57%) and income (90%) for the rural populace in the African continent (Yobe *et al*., 2019; African Development Report, 2016). Notwithstanding the noticeable urbanisation, agriculture has remained the primary means of subsistence for rural Africans, with smallholder farming playing a significant role (Yobe *et al*., 2019). Smallholder farming has been instrumental in achieving Sustainable Development Goals 8, 2, and 1, which aim to provide decent employment, promote economic growth, and end hunger and poverty.

Studies (Kapari *et al*., 2023; Ojogiwa & Mubangizi, 2023; Thamaga-Chitja & Morojele, 2014) have established a strong connection between food security and smallholder farming in multiple households in South Africa. However, there are concerns about the susceptibility of smallholder farming to economic instability, climate change, recession, and other distressing calamities (Ojogiwa & Mubangizi, 2023; Thamaga-Chitja & Morojele, 2014). Smallholder farmers continue to face challenges in getting adequate financial resources, combating soil degradation, and acquiring the needed agricultural infrastructure. These challenges are constraints that adversely affect farmers' livelihoods. Khapayi and Celliers (2016) underscore

the disjointed institutional coordination among entities that support smallholder farmers, largely due to bureaucratic hurdles in the public sector. Devaux *et al*. (2018) identify the struggles smallholder farmers face in establishing structured value chains, creating reliable safety nets, and expanding their farming operations (Mwadzingeni *et al*., 2020). This emphasises the need for collaboration and partnerships among stakeholders to enhance coordination between marketing and production for smallholder farmers.

On the other hand, reports indicate persistent fragmentation among institutions, policies, and stakeholders that persistently hinder the development of smallholder farming in South Africa. This is despite existing frameworks such as the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Plan (CAADP) and the 2013 Maputo Declaration, which are instrumental in promoting the integrated development of smallholder farming and encouraging farmers' participation (Kamara *et al*., 2019). Consequently, smallholder farmers' productivity is constrained, contributing to the prevalence of poverty, food insecurity, and weak institutional policies and support for this group. Wale *et al*. (2021) note that although smallholder farmers contribute greatly to the livelihoods of rural residents in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), the Province's agricultural potential is constrained by limited annual rainfall. Adenle *et al*. (2018) confirm the inadequate funding and institutional support for smallholder farming in many rural areas in Africa. The study underscores the absence of diverse support systems considered essential for achieving effective agricultural governance and enhancing farmers' responsiveness and resilience to unprecedented challenges. However, smallholder farmers could strengthen their capacity to address daunting socio-economic challenges that have impeded their development by collaborating with diverse stakeholders (Mwadzingeni *et al*., 2020).

The multi-stakeholder partnership is esteemed for its enhanced relevance in resolving complex problems. Facilitating collaboration among key actors and stakeholders in the agricultural sector is recognised as necessary for developing a workable agricultural system and enhancing the sustainability of smallholder farmers' livelihoods and adaptive capacity (Sjaf *et al*., 2022). Bayiyana *et al*. (2018) contend that buyers often take advantage of smallholder farmers due to the absence of organised farming systems and value chains. In addition to disorganised actors, smallholder farmers in South Africa face inconsistencies in agricultural policy, which should provide a clear roadmap for supporting this category of farmers (Popoola *et al*., 2020). The arguments mentioned above underpin the need to explore network governance as a framework with the potential to address the challenges faced by smallholder agriculture and to create a

conducive environment for actors to participate in and adopt policies that will lead to the attainment of the shared objective of promoting smallholder sustainability. This study identifies key stakeholders and their interactions in advancing smallholder farming within the communal area of Harry Gwala District in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This study also focuses on the role of network governance in enhancing smallholder farming in KZN Province. First, however, a discussion on smallholder farming in South Africa is necessary.

1.1. Smallholder Farming in South Africa

Farming is one of the strategies rural households employ to generate income and achieve their livelihood goals. The effectiveness of a nation's agricultural sector in enhancing its capacity for food storage, processing, distribution, and importation affects food availability (Yobe *et al*., 2019; Nchanji & Lutomia, 2021). While reports indicate that South Africa is nationally food secure, many rural communities face significant challenges in accessing food (Chakona & Shackleton, 2017). Smallholder farming is a well-established agricultural practice in rural communities and is recognised as an essential contributor to the agricultural Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Kephe *et al*., 2022). Studies (Thamaga-Chitja & Morojele, 2014; Kapari *et al*., 2023) show that the low productivity experienced by smallholder farmers is aggravated by the non-usage of modern technologies, the absence of essential components in the agricultural value chain, insufficient support services, and underdeveloped infrastructure. These challenges are compounded by water scarcity and the loss of agricultural land due to land degradation and mining activities (Kapari *et al*., 2023).

The classification of smallholder farmers is influenced by different factors such as land size, the primary motivation for farming, farm turnover, and the level of farmers' commercial positioning (Zantsi *et al*., 2019). Smallholder farmers in South Africa rely on family labour, which involves men, children, and women in farming practices. Most of the farmers have low levels of education and are economically disadvantaged. Their farming activities and livelihoods are vulnerable to unexpected economic conditions, climate change impacts, and land ownership discrimination, which consequently affect their subsistence and their households' food security (Thamaga-Chitja & Morojele, 2014). Given the numerous barriers to the development and sustainability of smallholder farming, various strategies have been proposed to enhance productivity and adaptability to current climate change. Some highly recommended measures include adopting innovative approaches such as Climate-Smart

Agriculture (CSA), implementing policy interventions, and building capacity. However, studies have emphasised the importance of collaboration between public and private actors to promote the successful implementation of these measures, facilitate irrigation development, and provide farmers with the necessary resources through donor and subsidy programs. Ultimately, these efforts aim to improve productivity and optimise time spent on farm activities. The case of smallholder farmers in Limpopo, who have experienced low productivity and high food insecurity, illustrates the consequences of the withdrawal of government support (Duncan *et al*., 2022; Waage *et al*., 2013). Kamara *et al*. (2019) emphasise the need for increased collaboration between non-governmental and governmental organisations to develop resilient strategies and provide essential resources for smallholder farmers in rural communities (Wang & Ran, 2022). A matter to which the discussion now turns.

1.2. Network Governance

The delineation of the construct of network governance pertains to an interconnected, collaborative approach to decision-making and problem-solving. It entails the participation of multiple stakeholders, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), private sector entities, community groups, and government agencies, working together to address complex issues (Patience & Nel, 2022; Wegner & Verschoore, 2022). Within network governance, the distribution of responsibility and authority among stakeholders is essential to achieving shared objectives (Mubangizi, 2021; Wang & Ran, 2022). The interconnectedness among network actors necessitates coordination regarding institutional arrangements, activities, and perspectives about the challenges they face and the desired solutions to be developed. An actor's actions can significantly influence others' interests and strategies (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012). Actors engage in complex interactions and are driven by their unique perceptions of problems, solutions, and strategies. The advantages of network governance include speed, flexibility, extended reach, availability of alternatives, improved quality, and enhanced effectiveness (Patience & Nel, 2022).

Additionally, the specialisation and diversity brought by various actors foster innovation within traditional government systems without incurring unnecessary cost escalations. This approach shifts accountability from political oversight to accountability between constituents (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that network governance also presents certain disadvantages, including inadequate protection of public values, the risk of

excluding those most in need, the potential for inaccurate quality metrics, the possibility of private monopolisation diminishing choice and competition, and the potential loss or absence of necessary government oversight. Furthermore, it can result in fragmented coordination, governmental complexities, role ambiguity, conflicts, and accountability issues (Patience & Nel, 2022). Network governance shares the common objective of addressing societal challenges by harnessing contributions from various stakeholders and involving service users, which, in the context of this study, refers to smallholder farmers, to achieve the desired outcomes. The involvement of diverse stakeholders enables the generation of additional insights and the connection of more resources to realise innovative and efficient solutions to identified public issues (Castelnovo, 2015). However, Brender *et al*. (2017) argue that network governance does not inherently guarantee effective collaboration among stakeholders or improved solution quality. The study points out that managing networks requires significant effort and the skills, knowledge, and technology that may not always be available within public entities. This highlights the complexity of decision-making within network governance and the likelihood of inherent conflicts among different stakeholders.

The interconnected approach of network governance promotes hybridity in governance, integrating various systems of government structures, private structures, and community-based mechanisms to achieve a distinctive objective (Minassians, 2015). Therefore, network governance could enable smallholder farmers to integrate their traditional practices with modern agricultural techniques, as advocated by stakeholders. Network governance could facilitate partnerships between smallholder farmers and organisations that provide resources such as fertilisers, machinery, and authorised support for land ownership or farming. Moreover, it ensures that farmers allocate and use the resources provided efficiently (World Economic Forum, 2016; Wegner & Verschoore, 2022).

Furthermore, network governance could enhance the exchange of expertise and knowledge between smallholder farmers and agricultural and climate experts (Chiputwa *et al*., 2020). Through network governance, policies and practices could be developed to better cater to farmers' specific needs (Cinquini *et al*., 2017). Consequently, more tailored and effective solutions could be guaranteed. Also, through network governance, smallholder farmers in rural communities could gain access to supportive networks and alliances that enhance their resilience to unexpected challenges posed by market fluctuations (Mapfumo *et al*., 2013). Stakeholders can be assured of efficient investment and optimal use of their resources, as

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decisions are designed to appropriately include and benefit individuals. Network governance recognises the value of contributions from all stakeholders and integrates them to acknowledge local participation and expert support (Kolk & Lenfant, 2016). This has the potential to develop sustainable farming systems that value local involvement while incorporating innovations to improve productivity. Network governance approaches could empower smallholder farmers in rural communities by giving them a voice in governance processes, promoting their self-reliance, reducing their dependence on top-down approaches, and fostering good governance (Wegner & Verschoore, 2022). Network governance could generate a synergistic effect in the context of smallholder farming (Sesan *et al*., 2021). Therefore, fostering network governance in smallholder agriculture is considered beneficial for farmers, enabling them to access the resources, knowledge, and support required to enhance their livelihoods and promote agricultural sustainability.

1.3. Network Governance for Sustainable Smallholder Farming

A flourishing network is characterised by collaboration with diverse entities to address shared concerns (Patience & Nel, 2022). Petersen and Kruss (2019) identify various entities in South Africa that are involved in smallholder farming. These include the National Department of Agriculture, Land Reform, and Rural Development (DALRRD), which was previously divided into the Department of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (DAFF) and the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform (DRDLR). The significance of these entities lies in their ability to connect and coordinate with one another regarding various matters relating to smallholder farming. Despite the perceived importance of extension services, they have not effectively facilitated connections among system entities, thereby hindering efficient network governance. As highlighted by Chaudhuri and Kendall (2021), one of the challenges is the limited budget, which renders it practically impossible for extension officers to reach many smallholder farmers. Moreover, there is insufficient political support to drive the development of relevant policies, including the Comprehensive Agricultural Support Programme (CASP), AgriBEE (Agricultural Sector Broad-based Black Economy Empowerment), and the Climate-Smart Agricultural Policy. It has been argued that smallholder farmers often face difficulties due to policy discrepancies that are presented as solutions to their challenges, as well as unethical political practices driven by personal agendas and self-enrichment (Henderson *et al*., 2020).

The institutional relationship among entities in supporting smallholder farming appears fragmented, with bureaucratic processes within the public sector, which serves as a leading institution. This is in addition to other prominent issues faced by smallholder farmers, such as management concerns, inadequate farming skills, lack of expertise in crop production, transportation costs, marketing challenges, insufficient support services, limited access to market information, and lack of expertise in livestock rearing (Khapayi & Celliers, 2016). According to Gyau (2014), sustainable livelihoods for smallholder farmers can be achieved, and their challenges could be better resolved through active collaboration with other stakeholders. However, Zerssa (2021) emphasises that agricultural extension services and other entities supporting communal smallholder farming fail to empower and practically equip this vulnerable group. The government is recognised as having the capacity to play a more active role in promoting and establishing connections among entities to facilitate access to resources and encourage private-sector involvement (Badiane & Collins, 2020).

Considering the points mentioned above, it is evident that network governance requires a leading entity with a clear vision. Engagement of entities is imperative, as it embodies the philosophy of fostering interactions among them within the system (Gonzalez-Porras *et al*., 2021). It should be noted that not all entities will make positive contributions; some may support or oppose proposed visions, and some may opt out of participation (Pasko *et al*., 2021). Private sector involvement is considered capable of reducing shortages and offering financial and technical support (Van Loon *et al*., 2020). Despite criticism of inadequate funding, NGO-led extension and advisory services approaches have been supportive (Badiane & Collins, 2020).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in three local municipalities in the Harry Gwala District of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa. The selected municipalities for the study are UMzimkhulu, Dr. Nkosana Dlaimini-Zuma, and Ubuhlebezwe. The rural municipalities, like others in KZN, have high poverty and unemployment rates, thereby making smallholder farming an essential means of livelihood for rural residents. The study employed a qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the subject through the perspectives of those directly involved, thereby avoiding broad generalisations (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). The choice of the research method from an interpretivist paradigm, based on a subjective social reality, justifies the data

collection instruments for the study. The qualitative data focused on the participants' behaviour and experiences. Data collection instruments included interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), which were employed after ethical clearance was obtained from the University. Interviews were effective in gathering relevant information from participants, whose permission was sought and documented in writing via signed consent forms. The study purposively targeted 20 smallholder farmers (7 from UMzimkhulu, 7 from Dr Nkosana Dlaimini-Zuma, and 6 from Ubuhlebezwe) with at least 3 years of experience, as well as 4 traditional leaders responsible for communal areas, for interviews. Among the four traditional leaders, two participants were selected from the UMzimkhulu district. These individuals possess characteristics and knowledge that are relevant to the study. Focus groups included 10 experienced smallholder farmers, typically from the executive committee. While secondary data were obtained from existing studies and policy documents, both primary and secondary data were presented using narrative analysis.

2.1. Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical clearance approval from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Protocol reference HSSREC/0001927/2020). This approval was contingent on a gatekeeper letter from all organisations where the study was conducted. Additionally, an informed consent template was used, which all respondents were required to sign prior to participating in the interviews and discussions. This template included a specific clause for consent to publish their anonymised data. Consequently, we have not included individual names as the names of the organisations involved are fundamental to the network analysis conducted in the study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the study are discussed in the sections that follow.

3.1. Exploring Inter-Relationships and Collaboration in Promoting Smallholder Farming

Insights derived from interviews and FGD support the Department of Agriculture's (DoA) prominent role as a critical player in smallholder farming. This perception may be attributed to the Department's long-standing presence in communities through agricultural extension services in South Africa (Khwidzhili & Worth, 2019). Fewer participants mentioned private-sector funders as influential players in smallholder farming. They highlighted the limited

involvement of private banks. This observation aligns with the challenges associated with financing for smallholder farming, primarily due to land permits that do not provide security for private banks to extend credit (Chisasa, 2019). These findings support Badiane and Collins' (2020) assertion that the private sector's presence is noticeably lacking in African Agriculture development initiatives, but contrast with Raidimi and Kabiti's (2017) perspective that private sector investments in agricultural research have increased.

Interestingly, SEDA (Small Enterprise Development Agency) and NGOs also emerged as noteworthy actors who can influence agricultural policy to enhance smallholder farming practices. A participant in the FGD expressed this viewpoint, stating that:

> *"The Department of Agriculture and SEDA provide influential support in our smallholder farming activities. The Department of Agriculture assists with production inputs while SEDA offers training to smallholder farmers" (FGD participants).*

These findings emphasise the complex landscape of actors involved in smallholder farming. While network governance can be commended for providing solutions within fragmented institutional frameworks, its effectiveness depends on the coordinated management of the platforms. The starting point lies in actor analysis, which refines and selects participants for inclusion in the smallholder farming value chain (de Janvry & Sadoulet, 2019). However, identifying actors is often challenging in developing countries (Chinseu *et al*., 2022). Thus, there is a need for lead actors who can structure the involvement of other actors towards detailed strategic directions and clear objectives. Without these leading actors, network governance will be more of a theoretical plan than a practical endeavour. The difficulty in mobilising networks and establishing relevant connections among diverse actors towards shared objectives is notably evident in developing nations (Kilelu *et al*., 2011). This observation led the researchers to examine the roles and engagement levels of the identified participants within the network.

3.2. The Roles of Identified Actors in Smallholder Farming

The significance of participants within the network is pivotal to the progress of smallholder agriculture. The interactions among diverse individuals could facilitate knowledge exchange and decentralised problem-solving, exemplifying effective network governance. Nevertheless, it is imperative to underscore that the knowledge shared among these individuals must be pertinent, accessible, and approached comprehensively and inclusively to inform policy and

practice (Chinseu *et al*., 2022). The examination of the roles individuals assume within a network has gained prominence due to the diverse services required by smallholder farming. The findings of Mtshali and Akinola (2021) reveal that advancing smallholder farmers requires assistance from a range of individuals who provide production inputs, build farmers' capacity, offer mentorship, provide extension services, and support farmers' infrastructure development.

Findings from the study emphasise the significant presence of actors, such as the DoA, NGOs, the private sector, the local municipality, and farmers' organisations, that provide extension services and support to farmers in the Harry Gwala District. Such services are critical in equipping farmers with knowledge and fostering self-reliance. However, these findings also raise questions about why smallholder farmers are sometimes unfairly labelled as ineffective contributors to food security, employment generation, and poverty reduction despite the limited large-scale adoption of technology (Fadeyi *et al*., 2022). While it may be argued that farmers' educational level could hinder agricultural extension services' efforts to build their capacity, it is crucial to recognise that budgetary constraints and insufficient political support may also be limiting factors (Chaudhuri & Kendall, 2021). Mwangi and Kariuki (2015) propose that technology adoption can be influenced by factors such as user-friendliness and unique features. Technological advancements have revolutionised the agricultural sector, as demonstrated by Sharma and Singh (2021) in Dhamntari, where farmers utilised ICT to access agricultural information and support. This finding raises questions about actors' effectiveness in carrying out their assigned tasks, aligning with Kilelu *et al*. (2011), who observed that countries like South Africa encounter challenges in mobilising networks among various actors.

While a participant emphasised the Department's pivotal role in safeguarding smallholder farmers' interests in the Harry Gwala District, few (5) participants expressed their disappointment that the DoA's performance fell short of their expectations. Also, a participant highlighted the contributions of agricultural extension officers, stating that,

> *"We occasionally interact with agricultural extension officers who provide us with advice on matters related to smallholder farming…. but they do not help with services like transportation, and they come late when we call them*."

This perspective confirms the findings of Mwadzingeni *et al*. (2020) that public extension services are highly important, but their effectiveness in promoting network governance remains inadequate. These services fail to adequately provide farmers with the information needed to strengthen their connections to relevant institutions.

3.3. Network Challenges in Supporting Smallholder Farming

The findings from the study reveal that actors do not frequently converge to discuss shared interests about smallholder farming. This limited interaction raises questions regarding the strength of institutional relationships and networking within the system. The participation of various actors, aside from the agriculture department, is minimal. This indicates a weakness in the necessary institutional relationships and networking to support the development of smallholder farming (Okorie *et al*., 2021). The findings from interviews with farmers and FGDs highlight the lack of robust networking forums for sharing ideas and information about new markets and loan opportunities.

While some participants acknowledge receiving assistance from certain actors, such as project and extension officers, the lack of adequate farmer involvement in the existing network suggests a disconnect between these actors and the farmers they seek to support. Some farmers expressed concern about being excluded from certain stakeholder meetings and highlighted the apparent fragility of existing relationships. A participant from the FGD stated that:

> *"Smallholder farming cannot succeed without support since we are poor and do not have money to buy farming equipment and inputs. Yet, those who are to support us are not working together, and we are not always involved in every activity related to our farming*."

This finding emphasises the imperative for the government and other stakeholders, including domestic agribusiness and civil society, to acknowledge the pivotal role of farmers in promoting the inclusive development of smallholder farming (Badiane & Collins, 2020). The findings reveal a gap in network management, underscoring the importance of collectively formulating regulations to guide individual actors' behaviour and facilitate robust interactions. It was further revealed that the government provides limited services, which are influenced by existing bureaucratic processes in the public sector. This necessitates a review of policies to ensure the resources and expertise needed to develop smallholder farming are available.

The literature suggests that effective institutional characteristics are shaped through the intentional design of network institutions to achieve specific objectives (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2006). Despite South Africa's potential for expanding smallholder farming into large-scale commercial agriculture, these farmers lack sufficient institutional support for productive operations. Other institutional obstacles, such as a lack of established rules and regulations within the network to collaboratively transform smallholder farming in rural areas, were

identified. Also, it was noted that limited knowledge about available support systems among farmers complicates efforts (Khephe *et al*., 2021).

In addition, the study identifies network complexity stemming from fragmented institutional objectives. This complexity weakens the role institutions play in supporting smallholder farming (Shaffer, 2020). Furthermore, the research underscores the limited contribution of institutions to the development of smallholder farming due to the absence of robust network platforms, resulting in a dearth of cultural norms, beliefs, and institutional values. While some acknowledge the positive influence of agricultural advisors in enhancing smallholder farming, extension services struggle to connect actors effectively within the network. Chaudhurt and Kendall (2021) argue that constrained budgets and inadequate political support hinder extension services. However, Henderson *et al*. (2020) contend that policy inconsistencies and politicians' unethical behaviour have detrimental impacts on smallholder farmers.

Furthermore, the study reveals a fragmented institutional relationship that is characterised by bureaucratic inefficiencies in the public sector and a lack of coherence in institutional support (Khephe *et al*., 2021). It was revealed that poorly interconnected programs, due to rigid government processes and procedures, weaken trust among actors within the network. This lack of trust undermines collective action in network governance. This study highlights the current exclusion of farmers from the development process. Notably, some participants from the FGD expressed discontentment with this pattern of interaction, suggesting that smallholder farmers' needs might not be adequately addressed within the networks. Such fragmented interactions undermine the network's effectiveness. One of the participants asserted that:

> *"Some actors are uncooperative and only attend events when a Member of the Executive Council (MEC) visits projects."*

This excerpt reveals the situation identified by Mnisi and Selelo (2021), where community services occasionally fail to communicate with citizens due to inadequately coordinated processes between government officials and users. The actors' conflicting interests have undoubtedly hindered their cooperation towards achieving a unified goal, perpetuating the argument above. The farmers' responses, as expressed by one of the FGD participants, indicated that:

> *"We lack an arranged venue for meetings. There are no available offers for network engagement since each actor visits the farm individually".*

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The culture of individualism creates an environment that runs counter to network governance principles, which require active interaction among actors (Zerssa *et al*., 2021; Badiane & Collins, 2020). The findings reveal a lack of actor commitment, an unclear purpose, and poor network management as major challenges undermining efforts to support smallholder farmers.

Notably, actors' engagement can be complex, as some may choose not to participate (Pasko *et al*., 2021). The findings show weak linkages and a disjointed approach to addressing smallholder farming challenges. This lack of cohesion stifles information sharing and coordination, impeding attempts to tackle the multifaceted issues faced by farmers. Similarly, Modirwa and Oladele (2017) and Okorie *et al*. (2021) identify weak linkages and institutional structures as impediments to the growth of smallholder farming. Local Economic Development (LED) initiatives and the DoA face criticism for their disjointed programs and failure to act as leading network actors. Ogunyiola *et al*. (2022) advocate a bottom-up approach that prioritises the interests of local smallholder farmers. This suggests that more effort is needed to support smallholder farmers adequately and, as an implication, alleviate rural poverty and hunger.

3.4. The Policy Landscape of Smallholder Farming Network

Smallholder farming is an essential activity for economic growth (Mtshali & Akinola, 2021). The primary issue facing modern South African agriculture, according to Mtshali and Akinola (2021) and Yami *et al*. (2018), is the unpredictability of policy formation. A supportive institutional and policy framework is necessary for the smallholder agricultural system to be dynamic. The government ought to design and implement procedures for the network to enhance productivity among smallholder farmers.

The results show a linear network of chances for policymaking and a notion of linear opportunities to address the problems faced by smallholder farmers.

The results of focus groups and interviews show that farmers generally have limited knowledge of the regulations that encourage cooperation and networking among smallholder farmers.

> *"I don't understand any policies that support smallholder farming." (FGD participant)*

Another participant from the FGD makes the following statement in response to a similar topic:

> *"I do not really know how these policy issues work*."

The comments present a concerning viewpoint because smallholder farmers are not privileged enough to fully understand the complex policy environment, which influences their success.

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These challenges stem from a lack of understanding of the policies already in place and how they can be used to leverage relationships among actors to ensure successful smallholder farming. The agricultural policymaking approach outlined above prevents South Africa from achieving the emancipation of smallholder farmers (Mbukazi, 2018).

In contrast to the smallholder scenario in first-world nations like Russia, significant improvements in the policy environment and economy have been noted through appropriate participation (Wegren, 2021). According to the study, policymaking in South Africa, particularly in the Harry Gwala District of the Province of KZN, continues to be biased against local players, primarily smallholder farmers. Due to poor actor integration and coordination, policy frequently fails to resolve bottlenecks.

The qualitative findings show that actors have a minimal impact on policy creation. The majority of participants argue that agricultural policies are imposed mainly upon them. This challenge is concerning, since smallholder farmers' input must be considered when establishing policies. The results also show that participation in policymaking depends on what farmers want to gain from such processes. As a result, the involvement of different actors is unequal. A farmer noted that:

> *I do not recall being invited to a policy meeting of this kind. We hear that discussions took place and decisions were taken on our behalf.*

This finding highlights existing inadequate participation. According to Mbokazi (2018), participation in agrarian policy reform is hindered by a lack of shared objectives and inadequate coordination among state organs, leading to misunderstandings about what one Department should be doing. A thriving smallholder farming system is essential for tackling food insecurity, supporting livelihoods and economic development (Mubanga & Kaonga, 2021). Therefore, it is evident that a supportive policy framework is essential to ensure a sustainable network of smallholder farmers, ultimately enabling the government to achieve its development goals. According to Perdana (2023), governing agricultural supply chains through contract farming spot markets could mitigate yield losses and optimise the utilisation of agricultural waste through a circular economy model. Maryono (2024) likewise emphasised the role of network governance in farmers' networks by engaging multiple stakeholders to develop sustainable agricultural practices.

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4. CONCLUSION

For smallholder farmers' activities to thrive, there is a need for support from strong, broader networks such as the Centre for Coordination of Agricultural Research and Development for Southern Africa and the Qinisa Initiative (focused on Agricultural Greenhouse Gas Research & Climate Smart Agriculture), with well-defined roles and effective collaboration. Various actors, including institutional entities, will bear distinct responsibilities in these networks to improve the performance and sustainability of smallholder farming. Smallholder farmers continue to grapple with barriers such as limited funding, climate-related challenges and insufficient networking. In response to these challenges, it is necessary to consolidate knowledge and align different perspectives from actors. Strengthening local partnerships and involving farmers in these networks could bridge knowledge gaps and improve decision-making and policy implementation regarding smallholder support and development. This paper highlights the need for policy changes, such as the AgriBEE (Agricultural Sector Broad-based Black Economy Empowerment), the Comprehensive Agricultural Support Programme (CASP), and the Climate-Smart Agricultural Policy, to enhance the living conditions of rural farmers while balancing the interests of their smallholder enterprises. Promoting local agriculture will not only support the growth of smallholder farmers but also create employment opportunities and contribute to South Africa's overall societal development. This necessitates government policies that facilitate inclusive, optimal engagement of the agricultural sector and other stakeholders. Inclusive participation is essential for delivering public goods efficiently and realising the potential benefits of smallholder farming.

This study underscores the need for a fundamental transformation in the management of the agricultural sector, particularly in the context of the digital era and climate change. Central to this transformation is the re-evaluation and reassessment of stakeholder roles through stakeholder mapping or analysis, feedback loops, and focus group discussions to ensure their active involvement in problem-solving processes. This approach will assist in developing an understanding of the unique challenges of smallholder farming and facilitate the implementation of relevant, targeted solutions. The active participation of stakeholders would improve communication, collaboration, and the development of strategies that are better aligned with the actual needs of smallholder farmers.

From the preceding conclusion, the following recommendations are valuable.

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Encourage active collaboration with actors' commitment and consensus: To improve the sustainability and efficiency of smallholder farming, it is important for various actors, including government entities, farmer organisations, and private-sector partners, to actively demonstrate their commitment to supporting smallholder farmers. Robust linkages and communication channels that facilitate knowledge sharing, align objectives, and address the specific needs of smallholder farmers should be created. Efforts should be made to involve smallholder farmers directly in these networks to ensure their voices and experiences help shape emerging policies and practices.

Advocate for agricultural policy reform and capacity building: Policymakers need to focus on reforming agricultural policies to improve land access, subsidies for farming materials, and fair pricing practices. Smallholder farming should be made more attractive, innovative, and profitable. In addition, policies that support innovative funding should be developed and implemented. The reform and capacity building for farmers will potentially make smallholder farming more appealing and, thereby, be a source of employment and livelihoods for youths. Capacity building is also required for network leaders and farmers to contend with the challenges posed by climate change and meet the demands of the digital era. Additionally, capacity-building initiatives are essential for equipping farmers with the knowledge and skills needed to design sustainable, climate-smart farming practices. These initiatives should include and empower youth and women, and encourage peer-to-peer learning among farmers.

Enhance stakeholder participation in decision-making: There is a need for a profound transformation in the public sector to embrace genuine stakeholder participation in decision-making processes. Actively involving relevant stakeholders in identifying problems and developing solutions will foster participatory communication and good governance. Also, stakeholders can better combine their knowledge, experiences, and expertise to understand context-specific challenges. This participatory approach will empower citizens and support the implementation of targeted interventions for specific groups.

4.1. Limitations of the Study

A limitation of this study is that its conclusions rely heavily on participants' subjective responses, shaped by their perceptions and understanding of the roles and interactions of existing actors within the KZN Province. Hence, this offers opportunities for future exploration of actors and their partnership support for smallholder farmers in other Provinces and beyond

South Africa. Also, other studies could investigate the institutional support for smallholder farmers and its impact on their livelihoods and business sustainability.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors appreciate the role of the SARChI Chair in Sustainable Rural Livelihoods in the publication of this research.

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