

Beyond Municipal Boundaries: Rethinking Public Amenities in Eswatini's Peri-Urban Transformation

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1 ABSTRACT

Across sub-Saharan Africa, the rapid expansion of urban frontiers has blurred the traditional boundaries between urban and rural spaces, resulting in complex peri-urban landscapes that necessitate new spatial planning approaches. In this evolving context, Eswatini's accelerating peri-urban transformation necessitates a spatially responsive re-evaluation of the planning, distribution, and governance of public amenities. The rapid expansion of settlement patterns beyond formal municipal jurisdictions, particularly within the Swazi Nation Land adjoining urban centers such as Manzini, Matsapha, and Mbabane, has generated new functional urban regions that challenge conventional planning regimes. These peri-urban zones have emerged as dynamic nodes of socio-economic activity and demographic growth, yet they remain marginal in the allocation of public infrastructure and social amenities. The persistent unevenness in spatial investment, particularly in youth-oriented facilities such as recreational spaces, libraries, sports fields, and community centers, highlights the structural limitations of a planning system that remains bounded by statutory municipal demarcations. This paper interrogates the spatial inequities and institutional fragmentation that have perpetuated the neglect of peri-urban territories within Eswatini's national development agenda. It contends that the inadequate provision of social infrastructure in these spaces exacerbates spatial injustice, reinforces socio-economic exclusion, and constrains pathways for youth empowerment. Anchored in a qualitative research design, the study synthesizes evidence from policy documents, academic discourse, and institutional reports to analyze prevailing trends, governance challenges, and service delivery deficits in the peri-urban planning landscape. The findings reveal that despite their demographic dynamism, peri-urban areas exhibit severe infrastructure backlogs, overcrowded social spaces, and limited public service accessibility. In response, the paper advances a Peri-Urban Youth Amenities Framework (PUYAF) that advocates for integrated spatial planning, redistributive resource allocation, and multi-level collaborative governance between municipalities, traditional authorities, and communities to promote spatial equity and enhance urban livability beyond municipal boundaries.

Keywords: peri-urban transformation, spatial justice, social infrastructure, youth development, Eswatini

2 INTRODUCTION

The development of peri-urban settlements has generated divergent perspectives within urban planning discourse. Turner (1977) frames these areas as adaptive housing solutions for low-income populations, while others portray them as urban dysfunctions, akin to blighted zones that threaten public health and safety (Amoako and Boamah, 2016). Such perceptions contribute to the marginalization of peri-urban communities, restricting their access to essential infrastructure and services despite rapid urbanization and technological advancement (Winayanti and Lang, 2004). Residents are frequently labeled as "unregulated occupants" and face tenure insecurity, including potential evictions or displacement due to policy changes. Consequently, these areas exemplify spatial inequities where economic and political priorities often overshadow the welfare, rights, and environmental sustainability of inhabitants. Peri-urban communities are commonly characterized by deficiencies in critical urban infrastructure, including potable water, sanitation, drainage systems, road networks, electricity, waste management, and public transport (Tutu and Stoler, 2016). Exclusion from municipal extension programs and urban service networks perpetuates socio-spatial marginalization. This deficit adversely affects residents' health, quality of life, and social well-being. Furthermore, peri-urban areas often lack emergency response services, educational facilities, and healthcare institutions, exacerbating vulnerability during crises such as floods or fires (Ansah and Chigbu, 2020). Housing and service provision in peri-urban areas frequently operate outside formal regulatory frameworks. As a result, activities such as water collection, electricity access, healthcare utilization, and informal commerce are often treated as unregulated. The provision of essential infrastructure is constrained by multiple dimensions, including legal, spatial, social, institutional, political, and economic barriers (Sinharoy

et al., 2019; Allen, 2010). Economic constraints, such as limited household income and insufficient municipal funding, inhibit infrastructure investment, while tenure insecurity undermines the establishment of sustainable service delivery mechanisms (Pierce, 2017).

Building on this argument, this research contends that Eswatini's municipal-centric spatial planning framework has inadequately accommodated the dynamics of peri-urban expansion, resulting in pronounced deficits in youth-oriented urban amenities, including public parks, libraries, sports facilities, and multi-purpose community centers. These infrastructural gaps exacerbate socio-spatial inequities, limiting opportunities for recreation, education, social interaction, and civic engagement among young residents. Through a critical examination of the spatial, institutional, and governance-related determinants of this under-provision, the study contributes to the discourse on inclusive urbanization, equitable infrastructure distribution, and the operationalization of the "right to the city" within peri-urban settings beyond formal municipal boundaries (Lefebvre, 1996; Harvey, 2008).

3 CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Peri-urbanization is widely understood as a process through which rural land is incrementally absorbed into expanding urban systems, often without corresponding institutional integration (Shaw, van Vliet & Verburg, 2020). In African settings, this process is frequently shaped by customary land tenure, weak regulatory oversight, and fragmented governance structures. Scholars argue that peri-urban areas are not merely transitional spaces but enduring socio-spatial formations that require tailored planning responses (Gonçalves et al., 2017). Failure to recognize this reality results in uneven development outcomes, where residents experience urban densities without urban services—a phenomenon increasingly described as "infrastructural exclusion". The concept of spatial justice provides a critical lens for understanding the uneven distribution of public amenities across space. Public infrastructure is not neutral; it reflects political priorities and institutional power relations (Solis-Navarrete & Bucio-Mendoza, 2025). In peri-urban Eswatini, youth experience compounded marginalization: spatially excluded from municipal service networks and socially excluded from development opportunities. Public amenities, parks, sports grounds, libraries, and community centers are widely recognized as foundational to social inclusion, crime prevention, and human development (UN-Habitat, 2012). Their absence limits young people's ability to build social capital, access knowledge, and participate meaningfully in community life.

3.1 Problem Statement

Despite the rapid growth and functional urbanization of peri-urban areas in Eswatini, these spaces remain excluded from systematic public amenity provision due to planning frameworks that are institutionally confined within municipal boundaries. This exclusion has resulted in persistent infrastructure backlogs and limited youth-oriented social amenities, reinforcing spatial injustice and socio-economic marginalization. The continued neglect of peri-urban territories raises critical questions about equity, governance, and the sustainability of Eswatini's urban transformation. This paper aims to examine the spatial and institutional factors underpinning the uneven provision of public amenities in Eswatini's peri-urban areas and to propose a framework for youth-centered, equitable service delivery beyond municipal boundaries.

The specific objectives are to:

- (1) Examine peri-urban growth patterns and governance arrangements in Eswatini.
- (2) Assess the implications of inadequate public amenities for youth development.
- (3) Identify institutional and planning gaps contributing to service delivery deficits; and
- (4) Propose a Peri-Urban Youth Amenities Framework (PUYAF) to guide inclusive planning and governance.

4 METHODOLOGY IMPERATIVES

The Kingdom of Eswatini has a current population of approximately 1,263,016 people. With a total land area of 17,200 km², the country has a population density of about 73 people per km² (or 189 people per square mile). Eswatini remains predominantly rural, with only 31.26% of the population, around 392,638 people, residing in urban areas, and a median age of 22.5 years (Worldometers, 2026). The median age in Eswatini indicates that the country has a predominantly youthful population, which has direct and significant

implications for this study. In the aspect of peri-urban transformation, this demographic profile means that young people constitute the largest and most affected user group of public amenities.

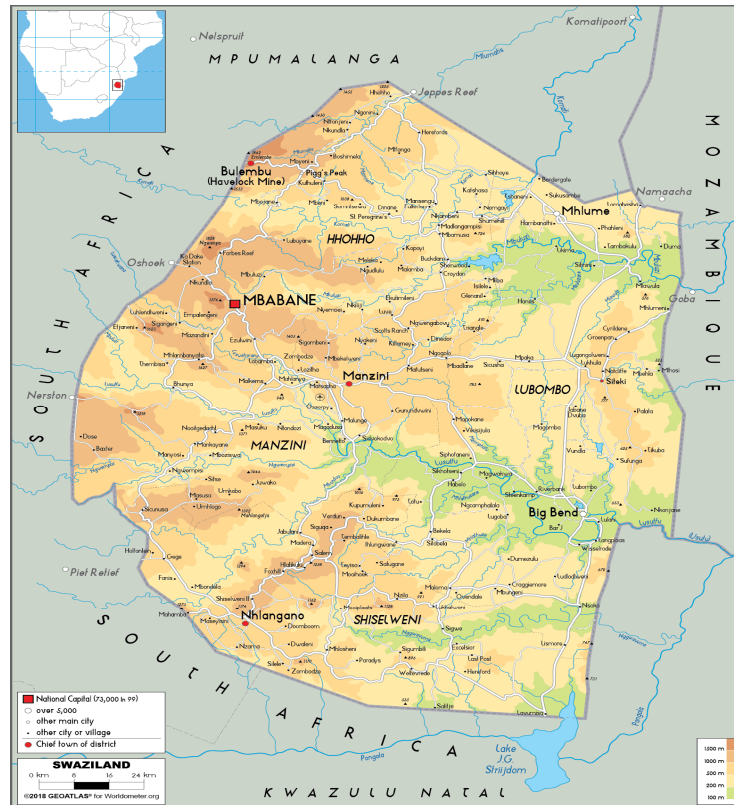


Figure 1: Study Area. Source: Worldometers (2026)

Figure 1 depicts where Eswatini is located. The study employs a qualitative research design grounded solely in secondary data analysis. The data corpus comprises national development strategies and statutory spatial planning frameworks; urban governance and youth-focused policy instruments; peer-reviewed scholarly literature addressing peri-urbanisation, spatial justice, and the provision of public amenities; as well as institutional reports produced by UN-Habitat and other regional development agencies. The use of secondary data analysis is particularly suited to interrogating structural planning constraints and policy discontinuities, especially in settings where primary data collection is limited by institutional barriers and resource constraints (Bowen, 2009). The collected materials were subjected to thematic analysis to distil recurring patterns and analytical themes, notably governance fragmentation, socio-spatial inequality, and the marginalisation of youth within planning and service delivery processes.

5 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

A pronounced disparity persists between rural and urban areas in both the extent of infrastructure provision and the quality of infrastructural services available (Eswatini, 2025). The analysis confirms that peri-urban areas in Eswatini have transitioned into functional urban zones, hosting dense populations and diverse economic activities. However, planning instruments continue to conceptualize these spaces as rural, limiting state investment in social infrastructure (UN-Habitat, 2020). The findings indicate acute deficits in youth-focused amenities, such as recreational areas, sports facilities, libraries, and community halls. Where such facilities do exist, they are frequently inadequately maintained, overstretched, or located within school premises, thereby limiting broader public accessibility (Ngwenya, 2024). This lack of infrastructure limits opportunities for structured recreation, learning, and social interaction, increasing youth vulnerability to substance abuse and antisocial behavior (UNODC, 2018). Children born in Khoza, Logoba, Msunduza, Ticantfwni, Nkwadini, Mangwaneni, and surrounding areas have limited spaces to play. Providing public parks would create venues for families to gather, children to enjoy outdoor activities, and communities to come together in celebration (Ngwenya, 2024). However, there are positives concerning peri-urban areas, as the Manzini Municipality extends an invitation to all regardless of communities not situated within the jurisdiction of the city (Municipal Council of Manzini, 2022). Fragmented governance among

municipalities, traditional authorities, and the central government is a significant contributor to neglect. The lack of coordinated planning mechanisms creates accountability gaps, leaving public amenities in peri-urban areas without clear institutional responsibility (Watson, 2009).

6 TOWARDS THE PERI-URBAN YOUTH AMENITIES FRAMEWORK (PUYAF)

In response to the findings of the study. The paper proposes the Peri-Urban Youth Amenities Framework (PUYAF), structured around four pillars as shown in Figure 2. The Peri-Urban Youth Amenities Framework (PUYAF) is primarily designed to address the socio-spatial and governance challenges of peri-urban communities in Eswatini, where rapid urban expansion, limited municipal services, and hybrid governance structures involving traditional authorities create pronounced deficits in youth-oriented public amenities. While contextually grounded in Eswatini, the framework's principles, integrated spatial planning, redistributive infrastructure investment, collaborative governance, and youth co-production, are transferable to other peri-urban regions in the Global South that face similar dynamics, such as parts of Malawi, Zambia, and Kenya, where hybrid governance, informal land tenure, and service inequities are prevalent. PUYAF differs from typical Global North frameworks, which generally assume formal municipal governance, established infrastructure networks, and stout service delivery, and often prioritize technological innovation and efficiency over equity and inclusion.

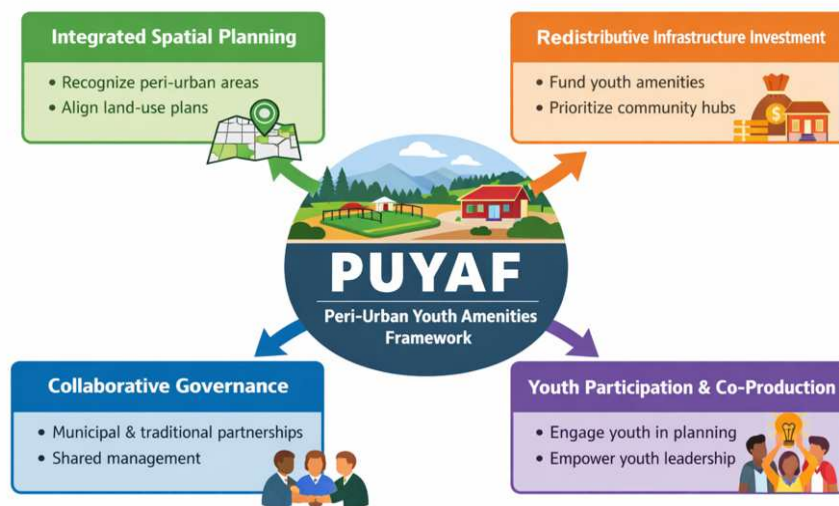


Figure 2: Peri-Urban Youth Amenities Framework (PUYAF).

The proposed Peri-Urban Youth Amenities Framework (PUYAF) responds directly to the persistent misalignment between spatial planning instruments and the lived realities of peri-urban transformation in Eswatini. Despite functioning as urbanized zones with dense populations and complex socio-economic activities, peri-urban areas continue to be framed as rural within statutory planning and development frameworks, resulting in structural exclusion from public investment in social infrastructure (UN-Habitat, 2020). Through formally recognizing peri-urban territories as permanent and integral components of the urban system, PUYAF promotes the integration of national development strategies, municipal spatial development frameworks, and traditional land governance arrangements. This integrated spatial planning approach addresses the fragmentation that has historically constrained coordinated infrastructure delivery in areas such as Khoza, Logoba, and Msunduzi, enabling more equitable and efficient allocation of youth-oriented public amenities. Central to this approach is a redistributive logic that prioritizes targeted investment in underserved peri-urban zones, particularly through the development of multi-functional community hubs that expand access beyond school premises, reduce infrastructural overload, and correct spatial imbalances in recreational and learning facilities.

In parallel, PUYAF addresses the institutional and social dimensions of infrastructure deprivation through collaborative governance and youth-centered co-production. The findings reveal that fragmented responsibilities among municipalities, traditional authorities, and the central government have created accountability gaps that undermine the planning, maintenance, and sustainability of public amenities in peri-urban areas. Through formalizing partnerships across governance levels and incorporating civil society

actors, the framework clarifies institutional mandates and builds on inclusive practices such as the Manzini Municipality's open-access provision of recreational facilities (Municipal Council of Manzini, 2022). Embedding youth participation in the design, management, and programming of public spaces further enhances social ownership, ensures contextual relevance, and strengthens community cohesion. This participatory approach responds directly to evidence linking the absence of safe, structured public environments to increased youth vulnerability, substance abuse, and antisocial behavior, positioning youth amenities as preventative social infrastructure rather than discretionary investments. Collectively, PUYAF offers an equity-driven, setting-sensitive planning response that repositions peri-urban youth amenities as a critical component of inclusive and sustainable spatial development in Eswatini.

7 CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that peri-urban areas in Eswatini have evolved into integral components of the national urban system but continue to be marginalized by municipal-bound planning approaches and fragmented governance arrangements. The persistent under-provision of youth-oriented public amenities reflects deeper structural and institutional shortcomings rather than isolated service delivery failures. Through proposing the Peri-Urban Youth Amenities Framework (PUYAF), the study advances a practical and setting-sensitive pathway for reorienting spatial planning, infrastructure investment, and governance toward greater equity and inclusion. Strengthening public amenities for peri-urban youth is not only a matter of service provision but a strategic investment in social cohesion, urban livability, and long-term national development beyond formal municipal boundaries.

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