

Short thesis for the degree of doctor of philosophy (PhD)

**Towards functional cross-border spatial planning: a case study of
Setsoto Local Municipality in the Free State Province-Lesotho
borderland**

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1. Introduction

The political, economic, and cultural differences between adjacent border sites influence the daily lives of borderland communities, which in turn contribute to shaping the borderland itself. Borderlands function as spaces where central authority is asserted, and national identity is simultaneously constructed and contested (Zhurzhenko, 2012). Residents in borderland tell their side of the story of the state formation (Zeller, 2015), and the central state also has its administrative structures and forms of governance that enforce sovereignty and jurisdiction of borders (Diener and Hagen, 2012), which give meaning to the border spaces. The polarised views of borders between local people in borderlands and the national state raise conflicting ideals. The mandates of the national state often do not align with the needs of communities in border regions. For Passi (2022), various actors, including individuals and institutions like politicians, civil servants, and legislators, actively engage with borders, shaping their organisation, governance, and regulation in ways that often lead to conflicting aims. The extent and nature of interactions with the border shape differing perceptions of its significance. Häkli (2012) asserts that national government priorities differ considerably from those of borderland communities that interact daily with an environment marked by specific physical and social characteristics. Thus, the intertwined relationship between society and the border affects their livelihoods, identities, and perceptions across various scales. Peña (2007) observed that there was a mismatch of priorities between different levels of government in cross-border planning at the U.S.-Mexico border, in which the local authorities were more concerned with issues of transport and urbanisation and less concerned with security, which are federal government priorities. Local governments lacked the authority to influence policy agendas at the national and state levels, leading to divergent perceptions of border issues and unaligned priorities. The concluding idea was that cross-border planning should be viewed as a long-term process that requires ongoing collaboration and coordination between different actors and institutions (Peña, 2007). Thus, the discrepancies between the expectations of the locals and the practice of spatial planning in border regions are hard to ignore. Furthermore, Bürkner (2020) criticised the EU top-down integration and de-bordering policies for being detached from the everyday experiences of communities in border spaces. Durand and Decoville (2020) echoed concerns that inconsistent results in cross-border cooperation (CBC) in the EU

have opened up concerns about whether cooperating across borders has become an end goal rather than a means of solving common problems. Friedmann (1993) argues that while national and transnational planning is significant, greater emphasis should be placed on regional and local planning, as these spaces are integral to everyday life.

Despite the existing body of literature on cross-border spatial planning (Durand, 2014; Frank et al., 2017; Paasi and Zimmerbauer, 2016), much of the research is predominantly Eurocentric (Korhonen et al., 2021), focusing on the European Union's (EU) integration and development models. This concentration on Western experiences limits the understanding of spatial planning rhetoric in other parts of the world. There is a pressing gap in the literature regarding case studies outside the Western context, particularly in African postcolonial states like South Africa, where borders are legacies of colonialism and apartheid, and their governance is shaped by unique historical, social and political conditions (Lesaffre, 2020; Newman, 2011). Moreover, Cappellano and Kurowska-Pysz (2020) suggest that future research should explore the roles of various stakeholders in cross-border regional planning, including local governments, non-governmental organisations, and community groups. Municipalities and border regions offer unique and valuable research opportunities due to their role as critical junctures where political agendas, institutional frameworks, and local development narratives converge and are shaped by the actions and decisions of multiple stakeholders (Jakola, 2019).

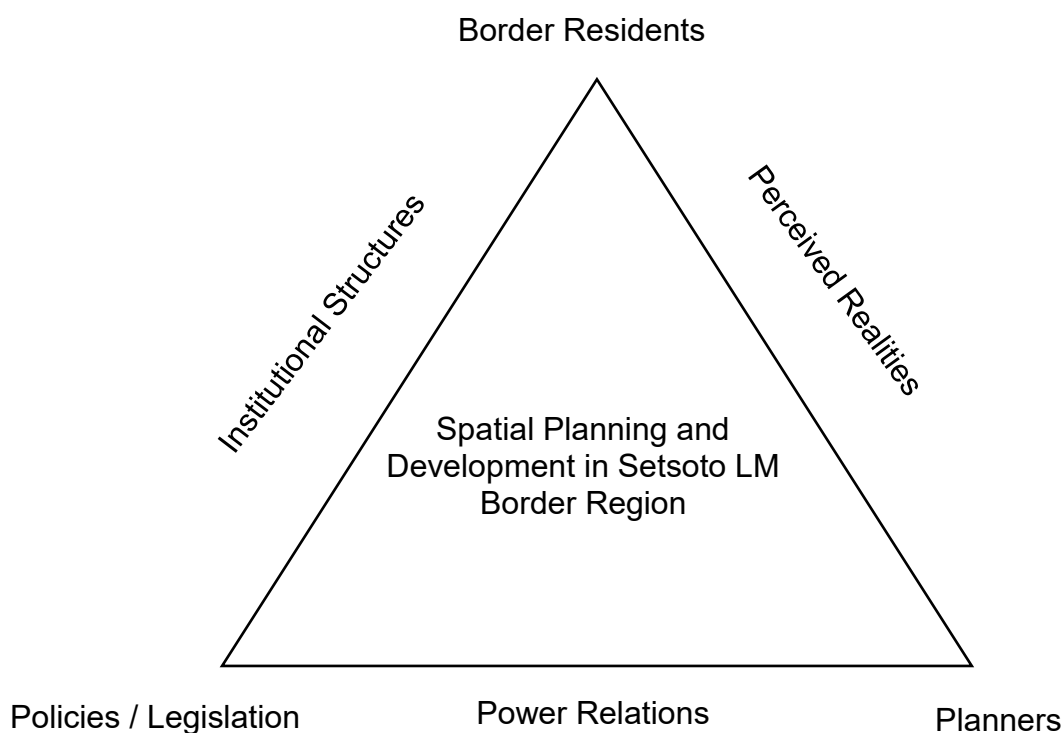
Thus, this research is both timely and relevant as it aims to examine the lived experiences of communities and the roles of planners in different spheres of government (municipal, provincial and national) in shaping spatial planning and development processes in Setsoto Local Municipality (LM), a cross-border region in South Africa. It seeks to uncover the unique challenges and opportunities associated with spatial planning and planning in a border region and to propose strategies and policy recommendations that enhance community participation, improve governance, and support effective spatial planning and development in such contexts (Figure 1).

The main research question:

How do the lived experiences of borderland communities and the collaborative practices of planners across different spheres of government shape spatial planning and development in Setsoto LM?

The research questions:

1. How do borderland residents in Setsoto LM perceive and experience life at the border, and what implications do these perceptions and experiences have for spatial planning and development?
2. How do planners perceive roles and engagement across the municipal, provincial and national spheres in shaping spatial planning and development processes in Setsoto LM?
3. How do current spatial planning and development practices address challenges and opportunities arising from the cross-border context in Setsoto LM?
4. What recommendations can enhance community participation, intergovernmental coordination and institutional capacity in border-region planning?

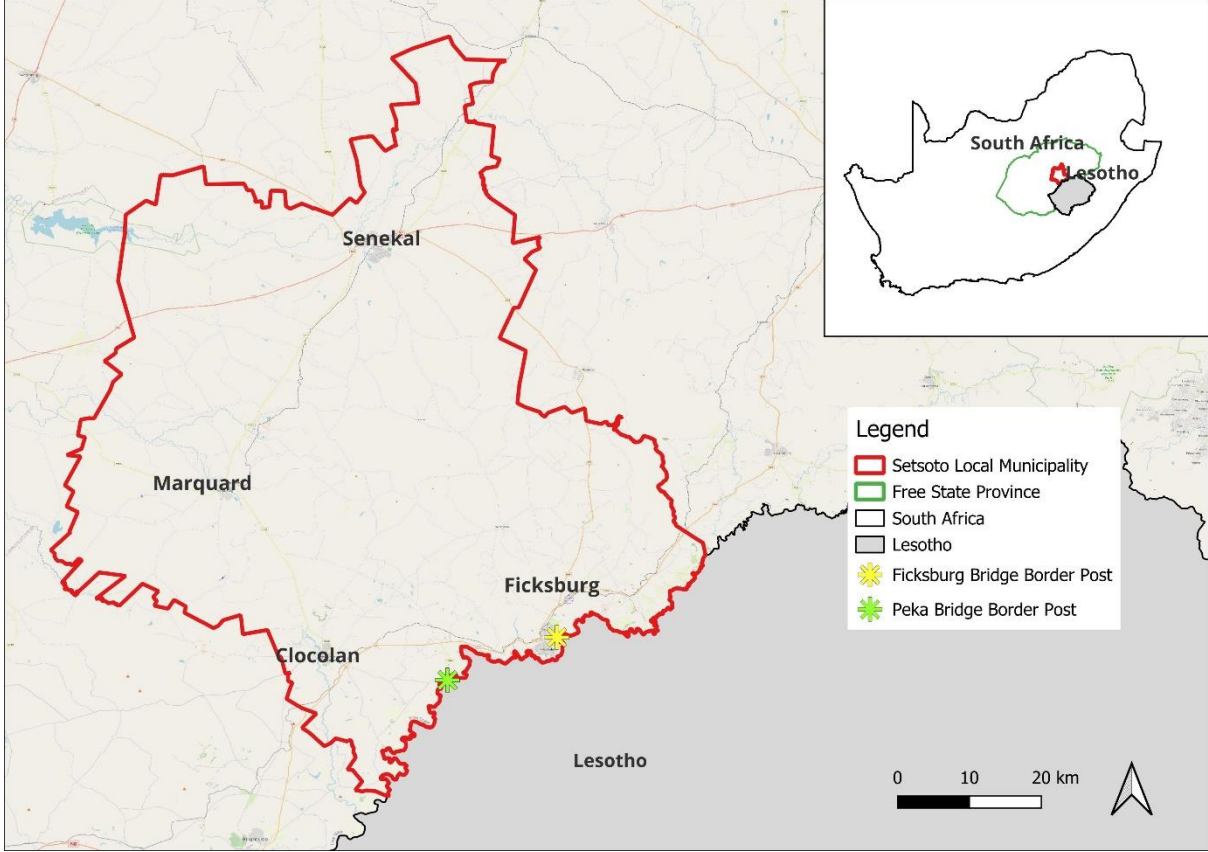


Source: Author's own

Figure 1: Simplified structure of the research aim.

South Africa has 53 land border posts with its neighbouring countries, 19 of which are designated for commercial trade. The six busiest border posts for commercial traffic include the Ficksburg border between South Africa and Lesotho in Setsoto LM (Cross-

Border Road Transport Agency, 2023, p. 28). Setsoto LM presents an unparalleled context for examining cross-border spatial planning and development due to its unique geographic, economic, and historical attributes. This municipality comprises four main towns: Ficksburg/Meqheleng/Caledon Park, Clocolan/Hlohlohwane, Senekal/Matwabeng, and Marquard/Moemaneng (Map 1).



Source: Author's own

Map 1: Setsoto LM study area locality.

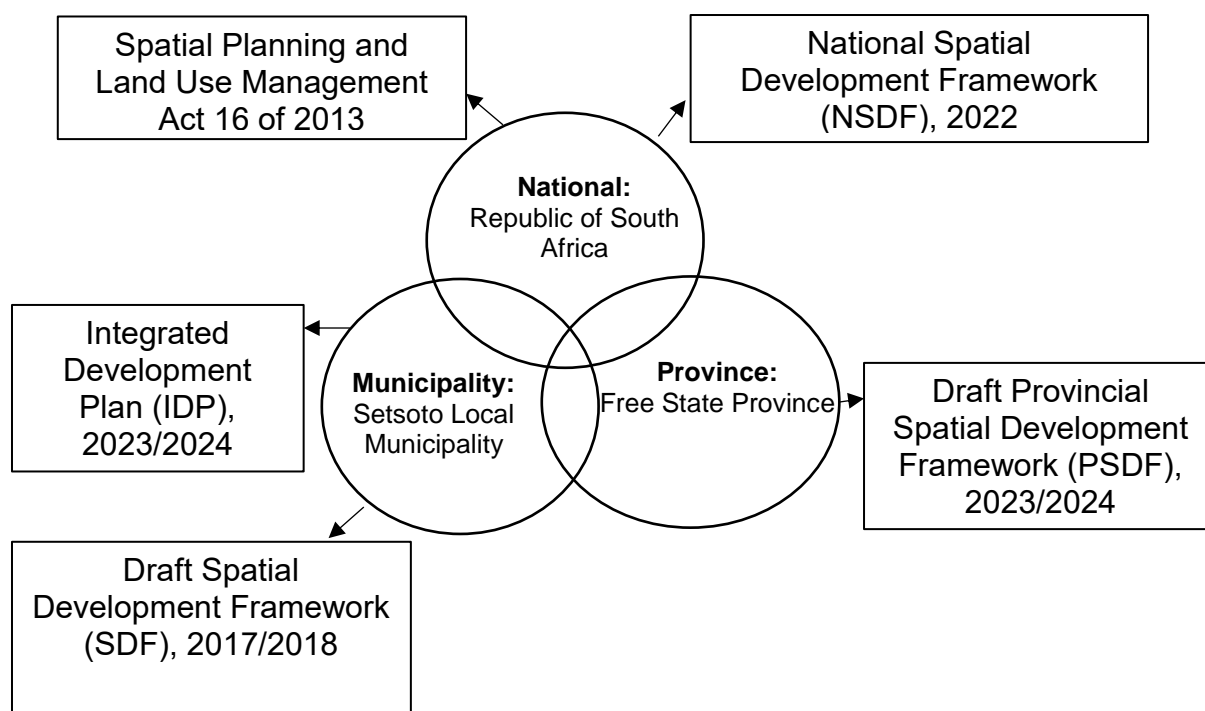
3. Methodology

Research Design: The research employed an exploratory case study design suitable for examining complex, context-dependent phenomena (Yin, 2014). Case studies allow for in-depth analysis of specific settings, issues, or individuals (Creswell, 2013), which is ideal for understanding the perceptions of borderland residents and how spatial planning policies and development frameworks at national, provincial, and municipal spheres of government conceptualise and prioritise borders in Setsoto LM.

Research Methods, Data Collection and Analysis Procedure: The case study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative (dominant) and quantitative (supplementary) data (Table 1) to achieve a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the research topic (Johnson et al., 2007).

Table 1: Summary of data collection approaches and process.

Data	Procedure
Interviews	Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted between February and November 2024 with the borderland residents and town planners. The participants were selected according to the snowball sampling, and the selection criteria were applied. To ensure rigour, data collection was carried out in three phases. In total, 27 interviewees participated from phases one to three. However, data from 18 participants were used for the final analysis: Community members (9), Municipal planners (3), Provincial planners (3) and National planners (3).
Observation	Observational data were collected through field notes, informal conversations, community meeting attendance and photographs, supporting a comprehensive understanding of the observed context.
Stats SA data	Quantitative census data from Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) was obtained via Stats SA SuperWEB—a web-based platform for accessing and analysing statistical datasets, which enables users to generate custom reports and visualisations. This data was utilised to provide contextual information on the demographics and socio-economic conditions within the Setsoto LM.
Mapping	QGIS was used for spatial representation of the locality map (see Map 1), low-income distribution map (see Map 2), and number of schools map in Setsoto LM.
Document Analysis	Policy documents were carefully selected to capture the multi-level governance border consideration in spatial planning and development in the context of Setsoto LM (Figure 2). The analysis drew on both content and discourse analysis techniques.



Source: Author's own

Figure 2: Selected spatial planning policy documents.

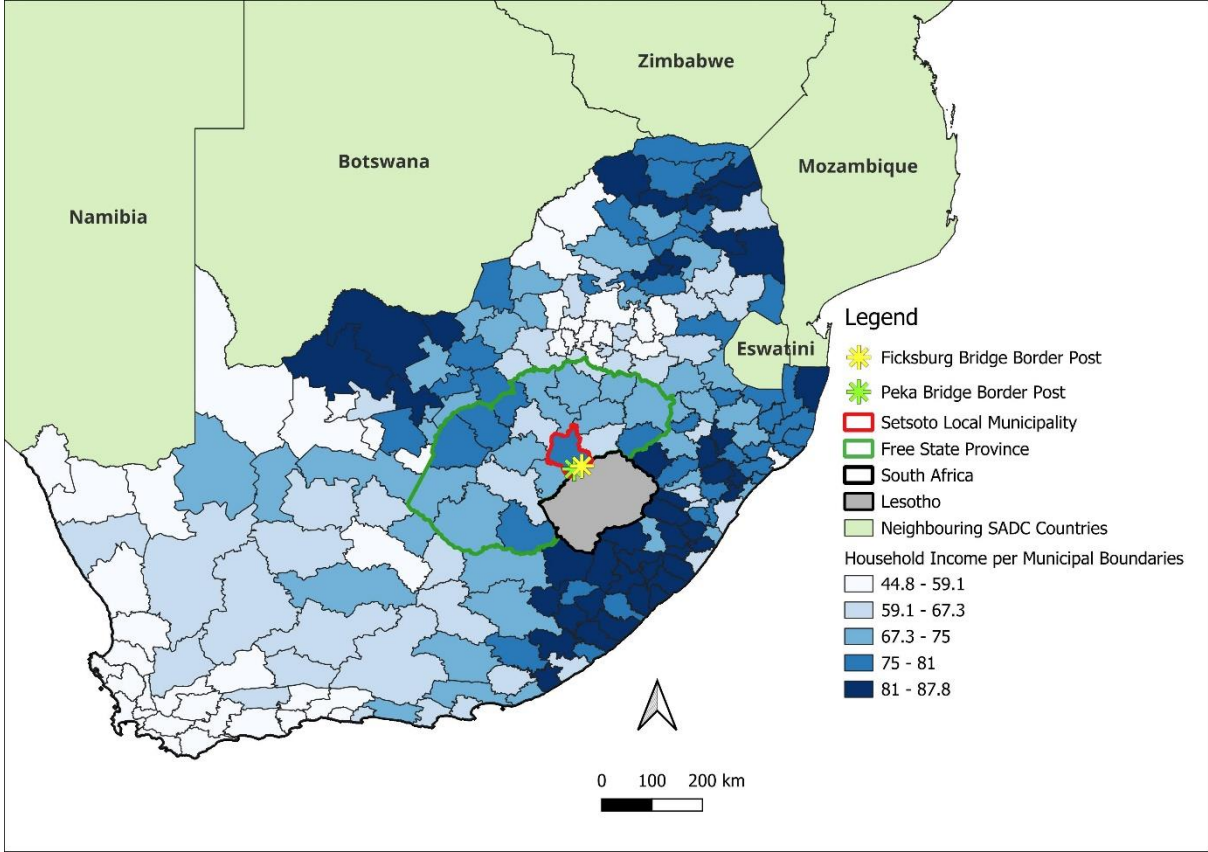
4. Results

Thesis statement 1

The distribution of gains from the border as a resource has yet to materialise for ordinary residents of Setsoto LM.

Despite the substantial volume of cross-border trade and the role of the Ficksburg Bridge as a commercial border post, for example, in 2021, the Ficksburg border post handled R4.1 billion (~ \$277 million USD) in South African exports to Lesotho and managed R2.5 billion (~ \$170 million USD) in imports to Lesotho. As a result, the Ficksburg Bridge border post accounted for 42% of the total volume of goods South Africa imported from Lesotho in 2021 (Cross-Border Road Transport Agency, 2022). These economic benefits are not effectively integrated with the local communities of Setsoto LM. Socio-economic indicators reveal systemic barriers to inclusive growth: formal employment rates stagnated at 30.59% in 2022, while fewer than 7% of residents aged 25–64 held tertiary qualifications, which constrains access to skilled

labour markets. Persistent income disparities further compound these challenges, with 77.91% of households earning below R38,400 annually (approximately \$5,000 USD in 2011 terms), revealing widespread low income despite the municipality’s proximity to a key node of trade and movement (Map 2).



Source: Author’s own

Map 1: Low annual household income cluster in percentages per South Africa’s municipal boundaries (2011).

The economic structure of Setsoto LM is predominantly shaped by primary and tertiary industries, with minimal industrial diversification: (i) Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing, and (ii) Wholesale and Retail Trade, Catering, and Accommodation form the largest employment sectors, comprising 33.5% and 20.2% of employment respectively in 2019. Furthermore, public infrastructure and social services (i.e. healthcare, schools) are inadequately resourced to accommodate transient populations linked to cross-border mobility. This disparity highlights systemic inefficiencies in realising the targeted

spatial planning and development strategies that could leverage its strategic location to improve the livelihoods of the locals.

Thesis Statement 2

There are shortcomings in municipal engagement practices and current public participation mechanisms risk devolving into performative exercises, exacerbating mistrust between local government and communities.

On 10 May 2024, the Setsoto LM convened an IDP and budget review meeting at the Ficksburg Community Hall, inviting public participation. This ward meeting provided a valuable opportunity for this research to conduct first-hand observation of community engagement in municipal processes. However, the meeting was poorly attended, with fewer than 30 participants, which raises concerns about public disengagement from municipal processes. Ward meetings typically cover 5,000–15,000 people (Piper and Von Lieres, 2008), meaning fewer than 30 attendees equate to under 1% of the ward population accessing public participation. This low turnout could suggest that:

- Lack of awareness about the meeting.
- Lack of interest in attending the meeting.
- Prior experiences where participation did not lead to visible change.
- Practical barriers (time, location, competing priorities).

The rhetoric of the meeting suggested a strategy aimed at convincing attendees of the municipality's efforts rather than fostering meaningful dialogue about systemic challenges or co-creating solutions with the community. For ordinary citizens, this approach could be deeply frustrating. Hearing about significant financial investments in projects that fail to translate into improved living standards fosters disillusionment and distrust. The meeting provided a platform for authorities to interact with ordinary citizens; however, it also illuminated a broader challenge in municipal governance which is the disconnect between procedural participation and substantive engagement. When communities perceive that their input fails to effect meaningful change, when their needs go unmet, and when their lived experiences are overlooked, their willingness to engage in such processes diminishes. This creates a vicious cycle where low attendance is used to justify top-down decision-making, further alienating residents and eroding trust.

Thesis Statement 3

The relationship between Setsoto LM borderland residents and their local space is characterised not by outright rejection or passive acceptance, but by the active negotiation of its contradictions and possibilities.

The lived experiences of Setsoto LM residents highlight the shortcomings of planning and development policies, exposing failures in effective practice. As a border municipality, Setsoto LM faces compounded developmental challenges, revealing gaps in planning, particularly in addressing infrastructural pressures in cross-border spaces. These include:

- Mushrooming informal settlements —as Setsoto LM is not adequately meeting residential development demands.
- Setsoto LM's incapability to sufficiently maintain a transportation network that accommodates both local mobility and the demands of cross-border trade.
- Service delivery inefficiencies emerge as a concern, with residents recounting persistent challenges related to irregular water supply, frequent electricity outages and failing sanitation infrastructure.
- Public healthcare systems are a concern in participants' accounts, particularly due to the dual burden of serving local residents and nationals from neighbouring Lesotho.

Furthermore, residents perceive a monopolisation of the economic benefits associated with the border, feeling excluded from the advantages while bearing the brunt of its challenges. While a selected few seem to profit, most endure borderland life's hardships without corresponding rewards. This frustration mirrors broader issues related to governance, inadequate infrastructure, and unequal resource distribution. The disparity between the potential opportunities and their lived reality cultivates a sense of stagnation, further exacerbated by perceptions of neglect from authorities. As described by residents, the border represents a politically charged space marked by contestation and unmet expectations. Some even question its very existence, sentiment encapsulated in repeated statements about its uselessness. As residents remarked:

The only thing 'e o ke e bonang e etsahala ke hore ba tlose diBorder gate mme e mpe re tshwaneng' [that I see should be happening is that they should remove the border gate and let us be the same] because we are not even benefiting from that (28-year-old male).

But the border, for me to have a border....I don't know..yeah for drugs and cars is okay but for the people ahhhh its like useless (42-year-old male).

'Go ya ka nna' [According to me] border gate is useless for me (29-year-old male).

That border is useless according to me (32-year-old male).

These views of the border reflect a disconnection between the state's vision of the border and the realities of those living alongside it. Far from being a site of just opportunities, the border, as described by residents, is ineffective and burdensome.

The historical legacy of Ficksburg town in Setsoto LM, once a prosperous town, is seen as having "fallen from grace". This sentiment is tinged with sadness and nostalgia as the community reflects on the fading grandeur of a town once shaped by its proximity to the border. As residents explain:

And what Ficksburg was 10 years ago and what Ficksburg is now, it's two different towns. When we moved to Ficksburg, it was the most beautiful place. It was the most cleanest place you could experience. What do you see now, you didn't see it back then (30-year-old female).

Ficksburg is not the same 'joalo le ka pele' [as before], I so wish 'o kare municipality ola wa pele o ka khutla' [the former municipality could come back] (29-year-old male)

The past and present coexist in tension, with many hoping to restore this borderland's former prominence while acknowledging the challenges imposed by its decaying state. There is a collective yearning for revitalisation intertwined with a recognition of the authorities' role in shaping the town's trajectory.

Community perceptions regarding participation further illustrate a complex social fabric. Faith in municipal-led meetings is notably absent, with many dismissing these gatherings as ineffective and politicised. Surprisingly, there is still a marked willingness

to instead participate in grassroots community meetings, where local concerns take precedence over political agendas.

I hate to participate in municipal meetings because I hate politics (28-year-old male).

These sentiments reflect a deeper frustration with top-down governance and the disconnect between municipal priorities and what communities actually need.

Thesis Statement 4

The relationship between municipal (local), provincial, and national spheres of government in addressing cross-border spatial planning challenges in Setsoto LM reveals systemic fragmentation and insufficient coordination.

Within the Setsoto LM, the lack of formal collaboration with Lesotho highlights the institutional void. Protocols or mechanisms to facilitate collaboration across the border are notably absent, leaving local planners without a framework to address shared developmental concerns. The Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act 16 of 2013 (SPLUMA), while providing a comprehensive framework for domestic land use in South Africa, makes no specific provisions for addressing cross-border regions. This omission leaves municipalities like Setsoto unequipped to navigate cross-border spatial challenges. A municipal planner state reflects:

So, when it comes to the border post or Lesotho, since this is an international border we are not able as I've already alluded that, we are not able at this level to be able to sit down with our counterparts on the other side of the of the border to try to synchronise our planning. So, there is no synergy between what is happening on this side and on the other side. So that does have a very direct negative impact because that harmony or that order does not exist (Municipal Planner 2).

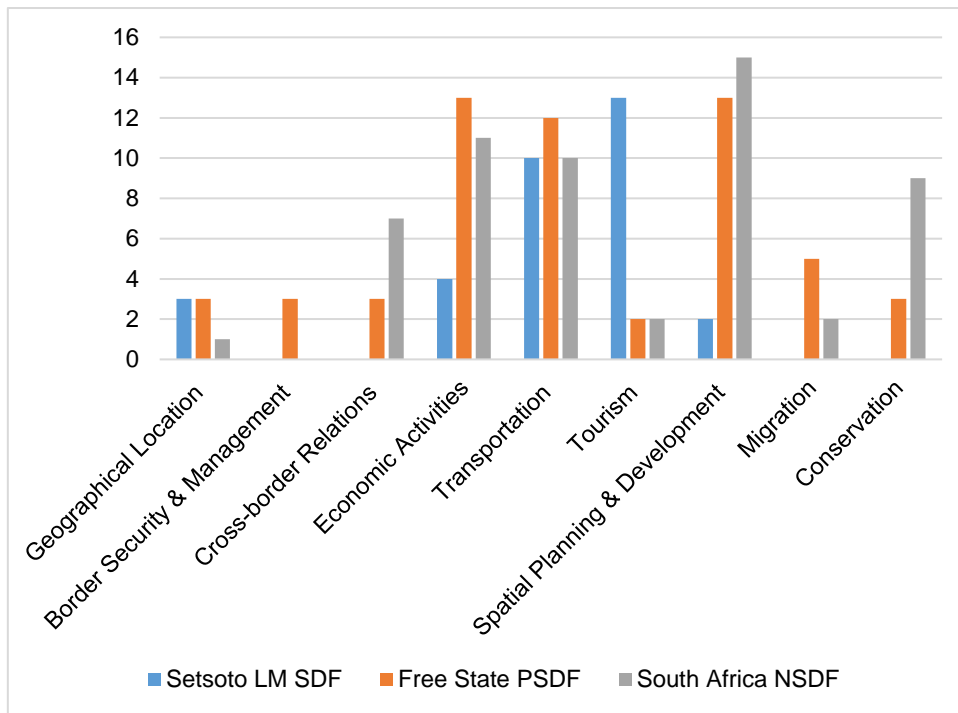
Interviewed municipal, provincial, and national planners reported limited direct engagement with counterparts in Lesotho. When interactions occur, they are typically confined to political levels, leaving significant operational gaps in planning.

In the municipal sphere of government, Setsoto LM bears the immediate responsibility for spatial development within its jurisdiction, yet its capacity remains constrained by inadequate support mechanisms and resources. Through its sector departments, the Free State Provincial government supports local municipalities like Setsoto by assisting with, but not limited to, developing SDFs, facilitating land-use applications, and addressing informal settlements through enumeration and impact assessments. However, these efforts are reactive rather than proactive, reflecting a lack of sustained engagement with border-specific issues. In the national sphere of government, frameworks such as the NDP and SPLUMA establish guidelines for development priorities and spatial planning and land use management, respectively. However, these frameworks provide no special consideration for the unique challenges of border municipalities. Support for Setsoto LM manifests as generic capacity-building initiatives. Thus, the absence of dedicated provisions for border municipalities results in a limited strategic focus on the unique challenges of cross-border spatial planning.

Thesis Statement 5

The contrasts between spatial plans in three spheres (municipal, provincial and national) of government highlight varying priorities and expose critical gaps that could hinder the development of cohesive strategies for border regions like Setsoto LM.

Regarding the themes associated with border-related mentions ‘border,’ ‘boundary,’ and ‘frontier’ (Figure 3). The findings reveal that in the national sphere of government, *Spatial Planning and Development* is imbued with regional aspirations tied to the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The emphasis here lies in strengthening regional integration through enhanced border infrastructure and trade routes. Similarly, the Free State PSDF articulates the significance of border posts in facilitating local cross-border exchanges. While provincial and national priorities align in their attention to infrastructure development linked with trade, the near absence of this theme in the Setsoto LM SDF suggests that localised planning may not yet reflect the broader aspirations of its provincial and national counterparts.



Source: Author's own

Figure 3: Themes from border-related mentions in SDFs.

Thesis Statement 6

The Setsoto LM discourse in planning reflects a municipal governance paradox: despite being the administrative unit closest to borderland communities, it remains structurally dependent on higher-tier spatial mandates, limiting its capacity to advance alternative border imaginaries.

At the national sphere of government, the planning approach frames border regions primarily as conduits for economic expansion. The spatial planning document neglects the socio-spatial complexities inherent to these areas, reducing them to instruments of macroeconomic strategy rather than recognising them as sites of diverse social, cultural, and environmental significance. In the provincial government sphere, borders are conceptualised as economic assets, reinforcing a narrow developmental paradigm that prioritises market-driven objectives over integrated socio-spatial strategies. This approach fails to account for the multifaceted nature of borderlands, which require development frameworks that address not only economic growth but also social equity, cultural identity, and environmental sustainability. The provincial focus on economic

utility risks perpetuating historical inequalities and overlooking the transformative potential of more inclusive planning practices. Setsoto LM planning documents, in contrast, demonstrate efforts to incorporate public participation into IDP and SDF, signalling an acknowledgement of consultative planning principles. However, the efficacy of these participatory mechanisms in shaping borderland development priorities remains limited. While municipal documents recognise challenges such as informal settlements, criminal activities, service delivery deficits, and socio-economic vulnerabilities in border areas, their approach tends to be remedial rather than transformative. This suggests a constrained capacity to address the structural causes of marginalisation and inequality, as policies often focus on mitigating symptoms rather than reimagining development paradigms.

5. Discussion

The borderland of Setsoto LM is not reducible to the rigid demarcation between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Instead, it emerges as a liminal space where hybrid identities are actively negotiated and reimagined (Anzaldúa, 1987). This borderland emerges as a contested space (simultaneously enabling and constraining life in the region) where aspirations and everyday realities collide (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996). Setsoto LM’s border proximity strains social services, healthcare systems, and sanitation infrastructure. These pressures are exacerbated by the asymmetries between South Africa and Lesotho, where disparities in economic and social conditions dictate the primary direction of migration flows as people seek better living conditions. Nevertheless, Basotho culture remains a unifying force across the South Africa-Lesotho border. Communities are united by culture and space but divided by citizenship. Spatial proximity and cultural interconnectedness foster a shared identity and sense of mutual belonging that transcends the geopolitical boundaries separating Lesotho and South Africa. Altogether, these layered conditions expose a constellation of challenges that necessitate regionally integrated spatial planning strategies that explicitly accommodate cross-border migration dynamics, asymmetrical service demands, infrastructure pressures and socio-cultural characteristics of border municipalities such as Setsoto. The perception of the border as “useless” reflects a failure to harness Foucault’s (1991, 1980) conception of power in ways that enable agency and local development. Instead of producing spaces of opportunity, the planning process entrenches exclusion, rendering the border a site of frustration rather than an economic

advantage. This signals not just an absence of equitable planning but the presence of a power structure that selectively determines whose interests shape spatial outcomes. This aligns with Flyvbjerg's (2002) argument that power distorts rational planning, privileging select groups while marginalising others. The monopolisation of border proximity advantages, as expressed by the local residents, highlights the extent to which planning decisions reinforce existing hierarchies rather than addressing community needs. Furthermore, the absence of cross-border protocols, mechanisms, and institutional frameworks in South Africa's spatial planning approaches restricts the potential for meaningful collaboration, leaving significant developmental opportunities unaddressed. Addressing cross-border spatial planning challenges in Setsoto LM necessitates a paradigm shift towards integrated governance, where all spheres of government engage in sustained, coordinated efforts. The current fragmented approach limits the municipality's ability to effectively meet the local community's needs and manage land-use pressures, crime concerns, informal settlements, and service provision. Without structural reforms facilitating strategic intergovernmental collaboration, border municipalities will remain marginalised within broader spatial planning and development agendas.

6. Conclusion, Recommendations and Future Research

This thesis advances the body of knowledge on the relationship between spatial planning and structural inequality within South Africa's border governance frameworks. Through an analysis of Setsoto LM, the research revealed how competing priorities across governmental tiers perpetuate uneven development, exposing a systemic misalignment between different spheres of government. The research illustrates that borderland communities in Setsoto LM inhabit a paradoxical space characterised by enduring socio-economic hardship, crime concerns and infrastructure challenges yet marked by cultural resilience and adaptive local practices. This co-existence of deprivation and agency signals the pressing necessity to reimagine the borderlands, not as peripheral zones but as sites with potential for socio-spatial empowerment. The persistence of these contradictions is compounded by the absence of central coordination and the institutional disconnection that continues to undermine coherent cross-border planning. This has curtailed meaningful collaboration, leaving critical developmental challenges unresolved. The thesis calls for a fundamental

reassessment of how spatial planning and development frameworks are conceptualised and operationalised within South Africa's border regions.

To address these systemic shortcomings, spatial planning in border regions must adopt collaborative, cross-border strategies that account for migration patterns, housing demands, infrastructure gaps, sustainable development, context-sensitivity and embrace grassroots initiatives:

- It is recommended that all municipalities within border regions incorporate a dedicated chapter or section in their IDPs, SDFs and PSDFs for the seven provinces with borderland municipalities—Free State, Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Northern Cape, North West, Limpopo, and Mpumalanga, as well as in the NSDF (Maila and Czimre, 2024).
- Setsoto LM should adopt a multimodal framework that integrates digital and hybrid strategies, ensuring equitable access and substantive engagement across its diverse community.
- It is recommended that border municipalities be recognised as priority zones for resource allocation and specialised regional development initiatives by both provincial and national governments.
- The establishment of an institutional body dedicated to cross-border spatial planning and development by the South African national government can be essential for addressing the unique challenges and opportunities of borderland communities.
- The development of a Cross-Border Regional SDF can be essential for fostering coordinated and sustainable planning between adjacent nations.
- Borderland municipalities should prioritise hiring planners with long-term residency or deep personal experience in border areas (Maila, 2025).

Future research should build on this analysis by conducting comparative studies between border municipalities to identify broader patterns in border governance, policy implementation, and development planning across different provincial and local contexts. Further examination is required into the integration of border considerations in planning education, particularly in shaping university curricula to equip future planners with the theoretical and practical expertise necessary to address the complexities of borderland development. Another critical avenue for investigation is the

role of urban planning and design in responding to crime and security challenges in border regions.

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List of publications related to the dissertation

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02697459.2025.2472112>
IF: 2 (2023)
2. **Maila, T. L., Czimre, K.:** Functional or Neglected Border Regions? Analysis of the Integrated Development Plans of Borderland Municipalities in South Africa.
Urban Sci. 8 (2), 1-19, 2024. EISSN: 2413-8851.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/urbansci8020046>
IF: 2.1 (2023)

Total IF of journals (all publications): 4,1

Total IF of journals (publications related to the dissertation): 4,1

The Candidate's publication data submitted to the Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

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