

Article

Diversifying Livelihoods under Constraints: On-Farm and Off-Farm Strategies in Irisvale, Umzingwane District, Zimbabwe

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Abstract: This study examines how women in Irisvale Resettlement Area, Umzingwane District, Zimbabwe, navigate structural, environmental, and socio-economic constraints through diversified livelihood strategies. Drawing on the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, Sen's Capability Approach, and Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), the research explores how on-farm and off-farm activities enhance household resilience, economic agency, and social influence. Guided by a transformative paradigm, a qualitative phenomenological design was employed, involving focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and key informant consultations with 38 participants. Findings reveal that limited access to land, credit, markets, and recurrent droughts constrain agricultural productivity, compelling women to engage in complementary non-farm activities such as petty trading, cross-border commerce, gold panning, and migration for remittances. Participants highlighted that, despite recurring shocks, diversification enabled them to sustain household consumption, invest in children's education, and participate in community networks. Drivers of diversification included education, access to technology, social capital, economic incentives, and gendered household roles. Social networks, alliances, and informal savings schemes emerged as critical mediators, translating human and financial resources into tangible outcomes. The study demonstrates that livelihood diversification in Irisvale functions not only as a survival strategy but also as a mechanism for expanding women's capabilities, renegotiating power relations, and enhancing agency within constrained socio-economic systems. Policy interventions should prioritize market access, gender-responsive financial inclusion, support for informal sector activities, and investment in education and low-cost technologies to foster equitable, sustainable, and resilient livelihoods.

Keywords: Livelihood diversification; Women's agency; Smallholder farming; Off-farm activities; Zimbabwe; Cultural historical activity theory

1. Introduction

The economic and social landscape of Irisvale Resettlement Area has shifted significantly over the past two decades, shaped by structural transformations in agriculture, national economic instability, and demographic pressures. While Zimbabwe's resettlement programmes were initially designed to redress colonial land imbalances, early implementation processes reproduced gendered inequalities by privileging men in land allocation, access to credit, and participation in decision-making structures (Moyo et al., 2025). These institutional biases limited women's access to productive resources and constrained their ability to establish stable agricultural livelihoods. As a result, women's economic participation has historically been shaped by restricted access to assets, reinforcing patterns of dependency and vulnerability in rural settings (Nyathi, 2019).

Within this context, agency is understood not merely as the capacity to cope with adversity, but as the ability of individuals to make strategic life choices, exercise decision-making power, and influence social and economic processes within the constraints of their environment (Kabeer, 2016). In highly constrained contexts such as Irisvale, agency is often expressed in incremental and relational ways, including the ability to generate independent income, contribute to household decision-making, and participate in community networks. This conceptualisation distinguishes agency from coping strategies, which are primarily concerned with short-term survival, by emphasising the capacity to shape one's circumstances and negotiate power relations over time.

Compounding these structural inequalities, the agro-ecological conditions of Irisvale further limit sustainable livelihoods. Located in Zimbabwe's semi-arid regions, the area is characterised by low and erratic rainfall, recurrent droughts, and high evapotranspiration rates, all of which undermine smallholder agricultural productivity and household food security (ZIMSTAT,

2022). These environmental stressors disproportionately affect women, who often have limited access to agricultural inputs and climate-resilient resources. Increasing climatic variability across southern Africa has further reduced the reliability of rain-fed agriculture, making it difficult for households to depend solely on farming as a source of livelihood (IPCC, 2022).

In response to these intersecting socio-economic and environmental constraints, women in Irisvale have increasingly turned to livelihood diversification. This involves engaging in multiple income-generating activities such as petty trading, cross-border commerce, micro-enterprises, and service provision to reduce vulnerability and enhance household resilience (Takaza & Chitereka, 2022; Jaka & Shava, 2018; UN Women, 2023). While diversification is often framed as a coping strategy in conditions of uncertainty, it also creates opportunities for women to expand their economic roles beyond subsistence agriculture.

The link between diversification and agency lies in the ways these livelihood activities enable women to move beyond survival towards greater economic participation and social influence. Through diversification, women gain access to independent income streams, which can enhance their bargaining power within households, increase their participation in financial decision-making, and strengthen their engagement in community networks. Thus, diversification functions not only as a response to constraint but also as a pathway through which women negotiate and expand their agency within existing socio-cultural structures.

From a theoretical perspective, the Capability Approach provides a useful lens for understanding this process, as it emphasises how access to resources and opportunities can expand individuals' freedoms to achieve valued ways of living (Kabeer, 2016). Similarly, Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) conceptualises livelihood diversification as a socially mediated activity shaped by interactions between individuals, community norms, and institutional structures (Engeström, 2015; Sannino & Engeström, 2018). Within the transformative research paradigm, these processes are understood as enabling marginalised groups to renegotiate power relations and create new forms of participation and influence (Mertens, 2019). In this sense, agency in Irisvale is not absolute but relational and context-dependent, emerging through everyday practices that allow women to navigate and subtly reshape structural constraints.

Despite growing scholarship on rural livelihoods in Zimbabwe, limited attention has been paid to how livelihood diversification contributes to women's agency and social influence. Existing studies tend to focus on income generation and informal economic activities without sufficiently examining how these translate into decision-making power, shifting gender roles, and improved well-being. Structural barriers such as unequal access to land, credit, and markets—continue to limit the transformative potential of diversification. However, evidence suggests that women actively engage in adaptive livelihood strategies that reflect forms of agency often overlooked in the literature. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by examining how diversified livelihood pathways in Irisvale enable women to expand their capabilities, negotiate gendered constraints, and reshape their roles within households and communities.

1.1. Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to examine how households, particularly women, in Irisvale Resettlement Area diversified their livelihoods through on-farm and off-farm strategies in response to environmental, structural, and socio-economic constraints, and to explore how these strategies influenced agency, resilience, and well-being.

1.2. Research Objectives

- To identify and analyse the structural, environmental, and institutional constraints that affected on-farm livelihood diversification among households in Irisvale Resettlement Area.
- To examine the drivers and forms of on-farm and off-farm livelihood diversification strategies adopted by women and households to sustain livelihoods under conditions of economic and climatic uncertainty.
- To explore how livelihood diversification influenced women's agency, social positioning, and household well-being within the socio-economic context of Irisvale.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an integrated but clearly differentiated theoretical framework, drawing on the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), the Capability Approach, and Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), with each framework serving a distinct analytical function. The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (Scoones, 1998) is used as the structural lens to examine how access to assets (e.g., land, finance, social networks) and institutional conditions shape women's livelihood opportunities and constraints in Irisvale. It provides the foundation for analysing what resources are available and how diversification emerges as a livelihood strategy within a context of environmental and socio-economic vulnerability.

The Capability Approach (Sen, 1999; Kabeer, 2016) is employed as the outcome-oriented lens, focusing on how these livelihood strategies translate into expanded freedoms and agency. Rather than equating diversification with mere income generation, this framework enables the study to assess whether women can convert resources into valued functionings, such as decision-making power, improved well-being, and participation in community life.

CHAT (Engeström, 2015; Sannino & Engeström, 2018) serves as the process-oriented lens, capturing how agency is negotiated and transformed through social interaction, cultural norms, and collective practices. It is particularly useful for analysing how women's engagement in diversified activities mediates shifts in gender relations, community participation, and power dynamics over time.

Together, these frameworks are not used in parallel but in a complementary sequence: the SLF explains the conditions and constraints shaping livelihood options; the Capability Approach evaluates the extent to which these options enhance agency; and CHAT illuminates the social processes through which agency is enacted and transformed. For instance, access to financial capital through informal savings groups (SLF) becomes significant when women can convert it into improved household welfare or decision-making authority (Capability Approach), while participation in these groups simultaneously reshapes social relations and collective identities (CHAT).

This integrated approach moves beyond theoretical layering by linking structure, outcomes, and social processes, thereby providing a more coherent and nuanced explanation of how livelihood diversification contributes to women's agency and social transformation in Irisvale.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Paradigm and Design

This study was guided by a transformative paradigm, which emphasizes addressing inequities, amplifying marginalized voices, and promoting social change (Mertens, 2015). This paradigm aligns with the study's focus on women's livelihood diversification in Irisvale, particularly in relation to agency, empowerment, and well-being. A qualitative phenomenological design was adopted to capture the lived experiences of participants, enabling an in-depth understanding of how women perceive and respond to socio-economic and environmental challenges (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenological approach was appropriate as it prioritises participants' subjective meanings and seeks to uncover the essence of shared experiences within a specific socio-cultural context.

3.2. Sampling and Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants with direct experience of livelihood diversification in Irisvale. Inclusion criteria for community participants were: (a) residence in Irisvale for at least five years, (b) active involvement in one or more livelihood activities, and (c) willingness to participate in both group and individual discussions. Key informants were selected based on their professional roles in local governance, NGOs, or community-based organisations involved in rural development.

The study involved 30 participants in focus group discussions (22 women and 8 men), ensuring diversity in age, livelihood activities, and household roles. Additionally, 8 key informants provided institutional perspectives. From this pool, 20 participants (primarily women engaged in diversified livelihoods) were purposively selected for in-depth interviews to allow deeper exploration of individual experiences of agency, decision-making, and social influence.

Data saturation was reached when no new themes or insights emerged during successive interviews, particularly regarding patterns of livelihood diversification, constraints, and expressions of agency. This iterative process ensured adequacy and depth of the data.

3.3. Data Generation Methods

Data were generated through focus group discussions and semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between November 2021 and March 2022. Focus groups (60–90 minutes) enabled participants to collectively reflect on shared experiences, facilitating interaction and comparison of livelihood strategies. Semi-structured interviews provided space for detailed personal narratives, particularly regarding empowerment, agency, and social positioning.

All interviews were conducted in Ndebele to ensure cultural and linguistic authenticity. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim in Ndebele and then translated into English. To preserve meaning, a back-translation process and careful comparison of original and translated transcripts were undertaken, ensuring that key cultural expressions and contextual nuances were retained.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2022), with procedures adapted to align with phenomenological inquiry. Analysis proceeded through six phases: familiarisation with the data, initial coding, generation of themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and final reporting.

To ensure phenomenological rigor, the researcher engaged in epoché (bracketing) throughout the analysis process. This involved consciously identifying and setting aside prior assumptions, theoretical preconceptions, and personal experiences related to rural livelihoods and gender, using reflexive journaling and ongoing self-reflection. This process helped prioritise participants' voices and meanings over researcher-imposed interpretations.

The extraction of the essence of lived experience involved moving beyond descriptive coding to identify shared patterns across participants' narratives. After initial coding, meaning units were clustered into themes reflecting common experiences of livelihood diversification, constraints, and agency. These themes were then synthesised to capture the underlying structure of participants' experiences, focusing on how women navigate and transform their socio-economic realities. Attention was given to both convergence and divergence in experiences to ensure a nuanced interpretation grounded in participants' perspectives.

3.5. Trustworthiness and Rigor

Several strategies were employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement in the field, triangulation of data sources (focus groups, interviews, and key informants), and member checking, where selected participants reviewed interpretations for accuracy. Dependability was ensured through a clear audit trail documenting data collection and analysis procedures. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive journaling and transparency in analytic decisions, reducing researcher bias. Transferability was supported through thick descriptions of the research context, participants, and processes, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to similar contexts.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Women's University in Africa, with additional clearance from provincial and district authorities. Participants provided written informed consent, were informed of their right to withdraw at any time and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used in reporting findings. Sensitive topics were approached with care, and data were securely stored in password-protected files. Reflexivity and cultural sensitivity were maintained throughout the research process to minimise power imbalances and ensure respectful engagement with participants.

4. Findings and Discussion

The study explored how villagers in Irisvale navigate the multiple challenges affecting their livelihoods, particularly in the context of environmental shocks, structural adjustment policies, and changing socio-economic conditions. Findings reveal that livelihoods are shaped not only by individual initiative but also by structural constraints, social networks, and gendered responsibilities. Participants' narratives highlight the interplay between on-farm and off-farm diversification strategies, the role of education and social capital, and the ways women and families mobilize resources to sustain and improve their living conditions. These findings can be interpreted through the lens of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), which emphasizes the dynamic relationship between individuals, community tools, and socio-economic structures, and the transformative paradigm, which foregrounds agency and empowerment in response to structural inequalities.

4.1. Constraints to On-Farm Diversification

Findings indicate that livelihood diversification in Irisvale is predominantly shaped by entrenched structural and environmental constraints, which significantly undermine the viability of agriculture as a stable primary livelihood. Participants consistently highlighted institutional breakdowns, particularly the closure of the Grain Marketing Board (GMB) depot, limited access to veterinary services, and unfavourable market conditions, all of which constrain productive agricultural engagement:

"We no longer have a place to sell our crops... prices are determined for us without our participation." "I watched my cattle die over the years because I could not afford medication."

These accounts reflect broader empirical patterns across rural Zimbabwe and sub-Saharan Africa, where institutional inefficiencies, weak market integration, and recurrent environmental shocks continue to limit smallholder agricultural productivity and livelihood security (Makate et al., 2016; Scoones et al., 2018; 2019; FAO, 2021). Climate variability, including recurrent

droughts and livestock disease outbreaks, further exacerbates these vulnerabilities by undermining production systems and increasing livelihood uncertainty (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2022).

From a Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) perspective, these challenges can be interpreted as systemic disruptions within the farming activity system. Breakdowns in rules (e.g., market structures, pricing mechanisms, and institutional governance) and tools (e.g., agricultural inputs, credit facilities, and veterinary services) constrain farmers' capacity to achieve intended outcomes and sustain productive activity (Hazell & Rahman, 2019; Rushton et al., 2017; Sannino & Engeström, 2018). Such disruptions not only reduce productivity but also marginalise farmers from meaningful participation in market processes.

Viewed through the Capability Approach, these structural constraints significantly restrict women's ability to convert available resources into valued functionings, including income security, food sufficiency, and social participation (Sen, 1999; Kabeer, 2021). Persistent gender inequalities in access to land, credit, and institutional support further limit women's substantive freedoms and livelihood choices (Doss et al., 2018). Consequently, diversification in this context largely reflects distress-driven adaptation rather than opportunity-led livelihood expansion (Alobo Loison, 2016; Béné et al., 2019).

These findings suggest that women's engagement in alternative livelihood activities emerges less from expanded opportunity and more from constrained necessity within a fragile socio-economic and ecological environment. Diversification should therefore be interpreted not only as evidence of resilience, but also as an indicator of systemic vulnerability and structural exclusion, reinforcing the need for policy interventions that address institutional failures, gender inequalities, and environmental risks simultaneously.

4.2. Drivers of On-Farm Diversification

Where on-farm diversification occurs, it is shaped by differential access to human, physical, and financial resources, particularly education, appropriate technologies, and economic incentives. Participants highlighted how these factors enable experimentation and adaptation within constrained environments:

"Farmers with more education are more likely to try new crops and opportunities." "With the solar pump, we can now do market gardening even without rain."

These accounts are consistent with existing literature demonstrating that education enhances farmers' capacity to access information, adopt innovations, and respond to environmental and market changes, while technologies such as irrigation systems reduce dependence on rainfall and enable more intensive and diversified production (Wossen et al., 2014; Barrett et al., 2001). From a Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) perspective, these factors constitute critical livelihood assets particularly human and physical capital that expand households' ability to pursue diversified and potentially more resilient livelihood strategies (Scoones, 2015; Bebbington, 1999).

However, access to these enabling resources remains uneven and socially differentiated. Structural inequalities, particularly along gender lines, continue to shape who can benefit from diversification opportunities. Women, despite playing a central role in agricultural production, are more likely to engage in small-scale, labour-intensive, and lower-return activities due to limited access to land, credit, and technology (Doss et al., 2018). Consequently, while on-farm diversification has the potential to enhance livelihood resilience and income generation, its benefits are unevenly distributed and often reproduce existing socio-economic and gendered disparities.

4.3. Drivers of Off-Farm Diversification

Off-farm diversification in Irisvale is largely a response to declining agricultural productivity and persistent livelihood insecurity. Participants emphasised this necessity-driven shift: "There were no gains from agriculture... we had to look for other sources of income," and "Gold mining helps us survive, even though droughts continue to affect farming." These accounts align with evidence that rural households diversify into non-farm activities as a risk-management strategy in contexts of climate stress and economic instability (Danso-Abbeam et al., 2020; Abate et al., 2025). Informal activities such as small-scale mining provide essential income support but are often characterised by instability, health risks, and labour trade-offs (Goba et al., 2021; Hlatshwayo et al., 2023).

Migration and remittances further constitute a central pillar of household survival strategies, as reflected in the statement: "We depend more on remittances from our children than on farming." Remittances offer critical income smoothing and enhance household resilience in the face of shocks (Mbewana et al., 2025). However, these livelihood pathways largely represent adaptive coping under constrained structural conditions rather than evidence of sustained upward mobility, reinforcing the prevalence of distress-driven diversification in the study context.

4.4. Social Networks, Alliances, and Access to Resources

Social capital emerged as a critical enabler of livelihood diversification in Irisvale. Participants noted its practical value in sustaining household needs: “Through savings groups, we manage to send children to school and buy food.” However, access to more lucrative opportunities was often unequal and dependent on social connections: “In mining, it depends on who you know... not everyone gets access.” These findings align with studies emphasizing the role of social networks in facilitating access to credit, information, and livelihood opportunities (Chuong, 2023; Mubangizi, 2025). Within the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, social capital is a key asset that shapes household resilience and adaptive capacity.

However, the distribution of social capital is uneven and frequently structured by power relations, which can reinforce rather than reduce inequality. Access to licences, markets, and income-generating opportunities is often mediated by patronage and personal influence (Murendo et al., 2025). Consequently, while social networks enable diversification and coping, they simultaneously reflect and reproduce underlying structural hierarchies within rural livelihood systems.

4.5. Gendered Dimensions of Livelihood Adaptation

Women’s livelihood strategies in Irisvale are deeply shaped by gendered inequalities and structural constraints. Participants highlighted their disproportionate burden and limited opportunities: “Women do most of the work, but we have limited opportunities,” and “We engage in whatever is available trading, gold panning, or even risky activities to survive.” Engagement in informal and high-risk activities such as cross-border trade, migration, gold panning, and commercial sex reflects constrained choices rather than genuine empowerment, often exposing women to exploitation, health risks, and social stigma (Mhembwe, 2022; Cooper et al, 2024). Migration further illustrates gendered adaptation, as noted by one participant: “More women are now migrating than men in search of work,” aligning with evidence that mobility is both a coping mechanism and a structurally shaped necessity (Hobley, 2011). From a Capability Approach perspective, these patterns reflect constrained agency, where livelihood decisions are made within narrow and often precarious options rather than representing expanded freedoms or empowerment.

4.6. Reconfiguring Agency and Social Positioning

Despite persistent structural constraints, the findings reveal modest shifts in women’s agency and social positioning within households and communities. Participants indicated that engagement in income-generating activities has enhanced their voice in decision-making:

“Because I contribute income, I now have a voice in household decisions.”

“Now when there are financial decisions, my opinion is considered.”

“Before, I depended on my husband, but now I can support the family and make some decisions.”

Some participants also reported increased social recognition and participation beyond the household:

“I am now part of community meetings because I contribute.”

These accounts suggest that women’s economic participation can strengthen bargaining power and expand involvement in household and community decisions, consistent with evidence linking income access to enhanced agency and autonomy (Doss et al., 2018; Kabeer, 2021). However, these changes remain incremental and context-specific rather than fully transformative. Persistent structural barriers continue to constrain long-term empowerment, as reflected in participants’ experiences:

“Even if I contribute, major decisions are still made by men.” “I do not own land or big assets.”

This indicates that gains in agency are partial and negotiated within existing power structures, rather than representing a fundamental shift in gender relations.

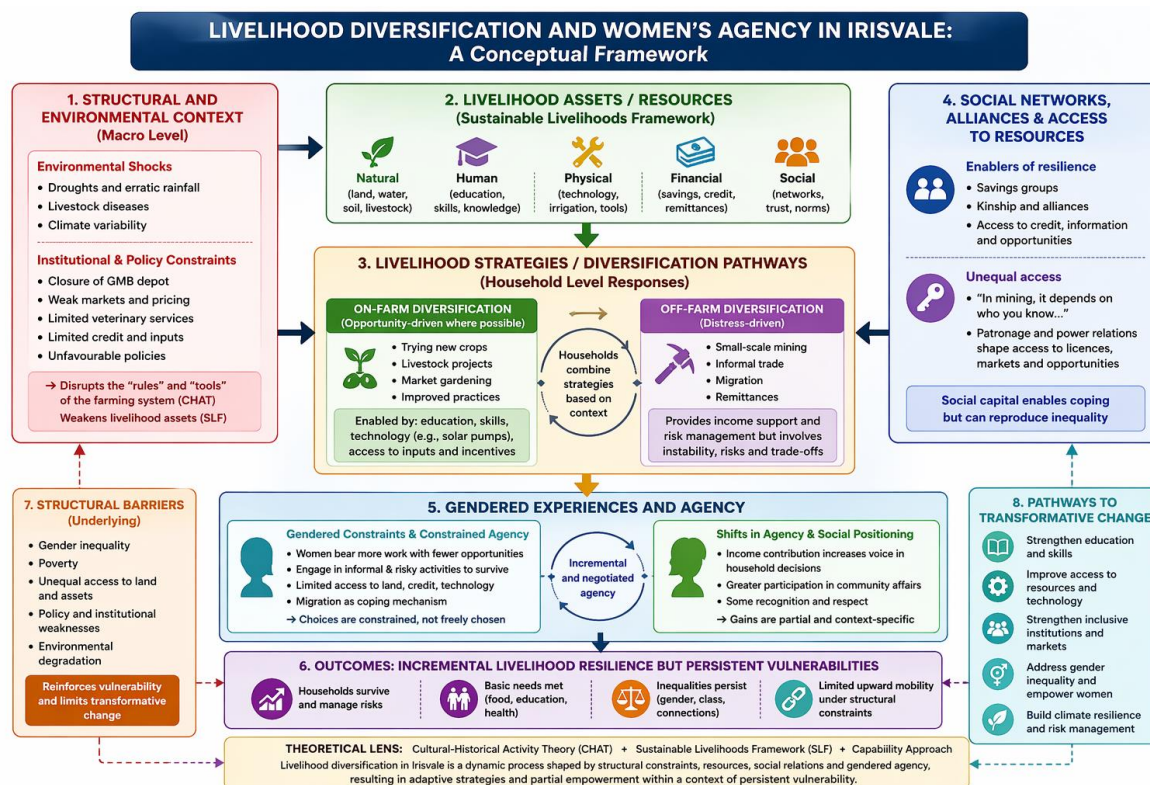


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of livelihood diversification and women's agency in Irisvale.

The diagram above presents a conceptual framework explaining livelihood diversification and women's agency in Irisvale as a multi-layered and interconnected process. At the structural level, environmental shocks (such as droughts and livestock disease) and institutional constraints (like weak markets and limited services) reduce agricultural viability and shape vulnerability. These conditions influence livelihood assets human, physical, financial, natural, and social capital which determine whether households engage in on-farm diversification (e.g., improved farming practices) or off-farm strategies such as informal trade, mining, and migration. Social networks play a dual role by enabling access to resources while also reproducing inequalities through unequal access to opportunities. Gendered dynamics show that women often engage in constrained, survival-driven livelihoods, with only gradual and partial improvements in agency and decision-making power. Overall, the framework illustrates that livelihood diversification is shaped by the interaction of structural constraints, available resources, social relations, and gendered power dynamics, leading to resilience but also persistent vulnerability.

5. Conclusions

The study concludes that livelihoods in Irisvale are shaped by the complex interplay of structural constraints, environmental shocks, and socio-economic factors, with women disproportionately affected by these dynamics. Both on-farm and off-farm diversification strategies emerge as adaptive responses to limited agricultural returns, market inaccessibility, and recurrent droughts, highlighting the resourcefulness and resilience of villagers. Education, technology, social networks, and alliances significantly influence the capacity for diversification, while gendered norms and structural inequities constrain opportunities, particularly for women. Applying Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) alongside a transformative paradigm reveals that the success of livelihood strategies depends not only on individual initiative but also on the availability of supportive tools, accessible markets, and inclusive social structures, emphasizing the need for interventions that address systemic barriers while enhancing local agency.

6. Recommendations

To strengthen livelihoods in Irisvale, interventions should focus on improving market access and infrastructure, such as rehabilitating local commodity depots and supporting value chain linkages for smallholder farmers. Policies and programs should enhance women's economic empowerment through targeted access to credit, land, and secure employment opportunities, while also supporting informal sector activities with regulation and safety measures. Investment in education, extension services, and low-cost

technologies such as solar-powered irrigation and climate-resilient inputs can increase on-farm diversification and productivity. Furthermore, promoting social capital through savings groups, cooperatives, and formalized community networks will enable households to pool resources, share knowledge, and buffer risks, ultimately fostering more equitable, sustainable, and resilient livelihood systems.

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