



Strategic Foresight and Institutional Resilience in Ocal Authorities Systems: Future-Proofing Murewa Rural District Council, Murewa

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Abstract

Local authorities in developing contexts increasingly operate within volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments characterised by climate shocks, fiscal instability, rapid technological change, demographic shifts, and governance pressures. In Zimbabwe, rural district councils constitute critical frontline institutions for service delivery, local economic development, and community resilience. Yet many remain structurally vulnerable due to financial fragility, infrastructure deficits, institutional capacity constraints, and limited anticipatory planning mechanisms. This paper develops a strategic foresight and institutional resilience framework to future-proof Murewa Rural District Council (MRDC) in Mashonaland East Province. Anchored in systems theory, anticipatory governance, and organisational resilience scholarship, the study adopts a qualitative and conceptual methodology drawing on documentary analysis, comparative governance literature, and foresight-based scenario mapping. The findings reveal systemic interdependencies between fiscal sustainability, digital transformation, climate resilience, service delivery performance, and leadership capability. The paper proposes an Integrated Local Authority Foresight and Resilience Framework to reposition MRDC from reactive crisis management toward adaptive, future-oriented governance. The study contributes to public administration theory by embedding strategic foresight within subnational governance systems and offers policy-relevant recommendations for strengthening resilience in Zimbabwean local authorities and comparable Global South contexts.

Keywords: VUCA: Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous; MRDC: Murewa Rural District Council; SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals; ZRBF: Zimbabwe Resilience Building Fund; MILAFRF: Murewa Integrated Local Authority Foresight and Resilience Framework

Introduction

Strategic foresight has gained prominence as a core governance capability in contexts characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity Chihobvu [1]. Rather than reacting to crises as they arise, foresight enables public institutions to systematically explore alternative futures, anticipate emerging risks, and align long-term development trajectories with evolving socio-economic and environmental realities Mutambisi & Chavunduka [2]; Chihobvu [1]. Globally, local authorities are increasingly positioned at the frontline of converging disruptions, including climate change, fiscal volatility, digital transformation, demographic shifts, and public health shocks OECD [3,4]; Mutambisi & Chavunduka [2]; Chihobvu [1]. These intersecting pressures require municipalities and rural councils to transition from reactive administrative models to anticipatory governance systems grounded in resilience thinking Mutambisi & Chavunduka [2]; Chihobvu [1]. The Organisation

for Economic Co-operation and Development underscores that institutionalising foresight enhances governments' capacity to stress-test policies, manage systemic risk, and deliver long-term public value OECD [3,4]. Similarly, the United Nations Development Programme emphasises anticipatory governance as a prerequisite for sustainable development and institutional adaptability in rapidly changing environments UNDP [5,6].

Furthermore, resilience has consequently emerged as a multidimensional governance paradigm encompassing economic stability, social cohesion, environmental sustainability, and institutional robustness UNDRR [7]; OECD [8]. Contemporary municipal resilience frameworks, such as the updated City Resilience Framework developed by Arup [9], conceptualise resilience as the capacity of systems to survive, adapt, and transform in response to chronic stresses and acute shocks. These global perspectives align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 11, which calls for

inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable human settlements Mutambisi & Chavunduka [2]; United Nations [10]. Yet the operationalisation of resilience at the local level remains uneven, particularly in developing contexts where resource constraints, fiscal decentralisation gaps, and governance fragmentation impede long-term planning World Bank [11]; UNDP [6].

In Zimbabwe, rural district councils constitute decentralised governance structures mandated to deliver essential public services under the Rural District Councils Act (Chapter 29:13). Thus, their responsibilities include land-use planning, environmental management, water provision, local road maintenance, and community development (Government of Zimbabwe, 2023). However, macroeconomic instability, infrastructure deficits, climate variability, and limited institutional capacity significantly constrain performance African Development Bank [12]; World Bank [11]. Reports by the World Bank [11] and the African Development Bank [12] highlight how fiscal pressures, governance weaknesses, and climate-related vulnerabilities continue to affect service delivery outcomes in Zimbabwean local authorities. Moreover, recent scholarship indicates persistent misalignment between national development strategies and local-level implementation, particularly regarding SDG mainstreaming and integrated planning frameworks Mutambisi & Chavunduka [2]; UNDP [6].

Murewa Rural District Council (MRDC), situated in Murewa District in Mashonaland East Province, typifies these structural challenges. The district's agrarian economy is highly climate-sensitive, with recurrent droughts, erratic rainfall patterns, and environmental degradation affecting agricultural productivity and revenue generation FAOUN [13]; ZIMSTAT [14]. Demographic pressures, infrastructure backlogs, limited digital integration, and constrained fiscal space further exacerbate systemic vulnerability World Bank [11]. In such contexts, institutional resilience extends beyond crisis response to encompass absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities embedded within governance systems UNDRR [7]. Integrating gender inclusivity, community participation, and sustainable resource management into local planning processes has been identified as critical to strengthening rural resilience pathways Chitauro [15]; UNDP [6]. Despite growing global recognition of anticipatory governance, strategic foresight remains weakly institutionalised within Zimbabwe's rural local authorities because planning processes often prioritise short-term budget cycles over long-term scenario analysis, limiting councils' ability to anticipate structural shifts or emerging risks OECD [8]; World Bank [11]. This study therefore examines how strategic foresight can be embedded within MRDC to strengthen institutional resilience and enhance adaptive governance capacity. By drawing on global resilience frameworks and contextualising them within Zimbabwe's decentralised governance architecture, the study contributes to emerging scholarship on foresight-driven local governance in climate-vulnerable and fiscally constrained settings.

Statement of the Problem

Strategic foresight has increasingly emerged as a critical governance instrument for navigating uncertainty in complex socio-ecological systems Chihobvu [1]. At the global level, institutions such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2022) underscore the intensifying and interconnected risks posed by climate change, particularly for agrarian economies in Sub-Saharan Africa. Similarly, the FAO [16] highlights the vulnerability of rural production systems to climatic variability, reinforcing the need for anticipatory planning in agriculture-dependent districts. Contemporary resilience scholarship, including the updated City Resilience Framework developed by Arup [9], conceptualizes resilience as multidimensional, spanning economic vitality, environmental stewardship, infrastructure robustness, and institutional effectiveness. In fragile fiscal environments, the World Bank [11] and the African Development Bank [12] further note that macroeconomic volatility and infrastructure deficits constrain local government performance, particularly in low-income countries. Thus, these global insights converge on the imperative for local authorities to shift from reactive service delivery toward anticipatory, systems-based governance models capable of absorbing shocks while sustaining core functions UNDRR [7]; World Bank [17].

Within Zimbabwe, rural district councils such as Murewa Rural District operate under persistent fiscal constraints, climate-induced agricultural disruptions, energy instability, and administrative capacity limitations, conditions that amplify exposure to cascading risks ZIMSTAT [14]; RBZ [18]. National and subnational governance misalignments have further constrained the effective mainstreaming of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into local authority planning frameworks, weakening institutional coherence and long-term preparedness Mutambisi & Chavunduka [2]. Whereas reports by the UNDP [19] and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2023) emphasize that anticipatory governance, digital transformation, and whole-of-government coordination are essential for strengthening public sector resilience, such approaches remain under-institutionalised in Zimbabwe's rural councils, where planning cycles are often compliance-driven and resource-constrained (Auditor-General of Zimbabwe [20]; Ministry of Local Government and Public Works [21]). For Murewa Rural District Council, whose agrarian economy and youthful demographic structure demand context-specific adaptation strategies, embedding foresight methodologies, such as scenario planning, resilience indicators, participatory governance mechanisms, and cross-sectoral coordination, offers a pathway toward institutional resilience and adaptive capacity FAOUN [13]; African Development Bank [12]. The central research problem therefore interrogates how MRDC can transition from short-term, compliance-driven planning cycles to a foresight-driven, resilience-oriented governance framework capable of aligning local implementation with national development priorities and

global sustainability imperatives.

Literature Review and Theoretical Anchors

Systems theory and local authorities

Systems theory provides a valuable lens for understanding the complexity of local authorities, conceptualising them as open systems that interact dynamically with their environments as noted by Chihobvu [1]. It is worth noting that local governments are embedded within fiscal, ecological, political, technological, and social subsystems, and therefore, their performance depends on the ability to adapt to shifting pressures across these domains Kunová [22]; Kinyua & Njuguna [23]; OECD [24]. Thus, failures in one subsystem, such as water infrastructure breakdowns, often cascade into other areas, undermining public health, economic productivity, and political legitimacy. This interconnectedness highlights the importance of systems thinking in municipal governance, where nonlinearity, feedback loops, and unintended consequences are common features Senge [25].

Recent scholarship underscores the relevance of systems theory in strengthening local governance. For instance, Setyawan [26] argue that effective performance management systems in local authorities must account for systemic interdependencies, particularly as demands for efficiency, accountability, and service quality intensify. Their systematic review and scholarly work demonstrate how technological advances and New Public Management principles have reshaped governance structures, requiring councils to adopt holistic approaches rather than siloed reforms Krogh & Triantafyllou [27]. In actual fact, the emphasis has shifted from siloed, sector-specific reforms toward holistic, integrated approaches that demand collaboration across institutions and stakeholders World Bank [28]; UNDP [29]. Similarly, Chisango et al. (2023) highlight that local authorities in Zimbabwe face systemic challenges, including resource constraints and governance inefficiencies, which impede their contribution to sustainability and competitiveness. These findings reinforce the need for integrated strategies that address multiple subsystems simultaneously.

Moreover, polycentric governance frameworks have emerged as complementary to systems theory, recognising that local authorities do not operate in isolation but within broader networks of traditional, regional, and national institutions OECD [30]; Faboye [31]; Njihia et al., 2024). Faboye [31] emphasize that polycentric arrangements enhance resilience by distributing authority and fostering collaboration across governance levels. This perspective aligns with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development OECD [30], which advocates for whole-of-council optimisation to improve service delivery and policy coherence. Thus, by embracing systems thinking, local authorities can better anticipate unintended consequences, leverage feedback mechanisms, and design adaptive governance models that respond to complex societal needs OECD [30] Faboye [31]; Njihia et al., 2024).

Strategic foresight and anticipatory governance

Strategic foresight is increasingly recognized as a critical discipline for navigating uncertainty in governance and policymaking. In effect, strategic foresight involves structured exploration of plausible futures to inform present action, using tools such as horizon scanning, scenario planning, stress testing, backcasting, and futures cone modelling Voros [32]; Miller [33]. Recent frameworks emphasize foresight as a way of embedding resilience into decision-making processes, enabling governments and organizations to anticipate disruptions and opportunities rather than merely reacting to them OECD [34]. In actual fact, this proactive orientation is particularly relevant in contexts of rapid technological change, climate volatility, and geopolitical instability, where traditional planning approaches often fall short OECD [34]; World Economic Forum, 2025). While anticipatory governance builds upon foresight by embedding it within institutional systems of policy design, budgeting, and performance management OECD [34]; Vaquero-Piñero, Terribile, & Giovannini [35]. Actually, it is not simply about predicting the future but about creating adaptive structures that can respond to multiple possible futures OECD [34]; Vaquero-Piñero [35]; UN [36]. The United Nations Futures Lab. (2023) highlights foresight as a necessary capability for international organizations, stressing its role in aligning long-term strategies with emerging global challenges. Thus, by integrating foresight into governance, institutions can move beyond short-term fixes and cultivate anticipatory capacity, ensuring that policies remain robust under diverse scenarios UNDP [5]; UN Futures Lab [37].

For local authorities, anticipatory governance has tangible applications. Municipalities can employ foresight to design proactive climate adaptation strategies, model infrastructure lifecycles, forecast demographic shifts, and anticipate fiscal risks. OECD case studies from Italy, Lithuania, and Malta illustrate how foresight-driven approaches have enabled governments to strengthen resilience and adapt to uncertainty by investing in capacity building and innovative planning OECD [34]. Such practices demonstrate that anticipatory governance is not an abstract concept but a practical framework for enhancing public sector agility and responsiveness OECD [34]; WEF, 2025. Ultimately, strategic foresight and anticipatory governance represent complementary approaches to future-oriented policymaking Chihobvu [1]. Actually, foresight provides the tools and methodologies to explore uncertainty, while anticipatory governance institutionalizes these insights into actionable systems (UN Futures Lab & ISC, 2025; Ramakrishnan [38]. Together, they enable governments and organizations to navigate complexity with greater confidence, ensuring that present decisions are informed by a nuanced understanding of possible futures Vaquero-Piñero, Terribile, & Giovannini [35]; Anticipation Hub, 2025; Bongo [39]. This integration is essential for building resilient societies capable of thriving amid accelerating change.

Organisational resilience

Together, these capacities provide a holistic framework for understanding resilience as more than mere survival, but as a proactive and strategic capability for thriving in volatile environments Chihobvu [1]. In local governance contexts, resilience extends beyond emergency response mechanisms to encompass sustained service continuity, institutional legitimacy, and adaptive learning Malan [40]; Abdillah [41]; Nzewi [42]. Recent studies illustrate these dimensions globally and locally. For example, Nzewi [42] highlights adaptive governance in South African municipalities as a mechanism for resilient service delivery, while Malan [40] examine institutional readiness in the face of climate and governance pressures. Abdillah [41] provide a broader public administration perspective, framing resilience as a cross-scale governance agenda. Recent studies highlight how municipalities and local governments must anticipate climate-related risks, shifting policy frameworks, and rising service delivery demands while maintaining public trust Malan [40]. Thus, this requires embedding resilience into governance structures, not only to absorb immediate shocks but also to adapt to evolving socio-political conditions and transform institutional practices for long-term effectiveness Ansell [43]. Such resilience is increasingly seen as a cornerstone of democratic legitimacy, as citizens expect institutions to remain responsive and accountable in times of disruption Chihobvu [1].

It is also worth noting that leadership plays a critical mediating role in translating foresight into operational practice. Boin and Lodge [44] argue that resilient leadership involves balancing anticipation with improvisation, ensuring that strategic foresight is embedded into daily operations. Therefore, leaders must cultivate organisational cultures that encourage learning, experimentation, and collaboration across institutional boundaries Nzewi [42]; WFP, 2026). This is particularly vital in local governance, where leaders often face resource constraints and heightened public scrutiny Chihobvu [1]. Effective leadership thus becomes the bridge between resilience capacities and their practical enactment, enabling institutions to not only survive crises but also emerge stronger and more legitimate Muallidin [45]; Frost [46]. In sum, organisational resilience in local governance is best understood as a dynamic interplay between absorptive, adaptive, and transformative capacities, mediated by leadership and institutional learning (WFP, 2025; Oxfam [47]. By embedding resilience into governance structures, local institutions can ensure continuity of services, maintain legitimacy, and foster innovation in the face of uncertainty McKinsey & Company [48]. Thus, this multidimensional approach underscores resilience not as a static attribute but as a continuous process of adjustment and renewal, essential for navigating the complexities of contemporary governance (Leader-Edu., 2026).

Methodology

Methodologically, this study employed foresight-based

scenario mapping using Voros [32] futures cone, which distinguishes between possible, plausible, probable, and preferred futures. Applying this model to Murewa allowed for structured exploration of alternative governance trajectories, ranging from climate-induced disruptions to opportunities for digital transformation in service delivery IPCC [49]; World Bank [11]. The futures cone facilitated reflexive dialogue among stakeholders, enabling councils to identify preferred futures aligned with community aspirations, consistent with participatory foresight approaches promoted by UNESCO [50] and recent local government innovation frameworks advanced by UCLG [51]. This approach complemented thematic analysis, which, following Braun and Clarke's [52] reflexive methodology, emphasizes the co-construction of meaning and acknowledges researcher subjectivity in interpreting governance narratives.

Ultimately, the study prioritizes analytical transferability rather than statistical generalisability, offering conceptual insights applicable to other rural councils in Zimbabwe and beyond, in line with resilience-oriented local governance reforms supported by the UNDP [5] and Zimbabwe's decentralisation agenda under the Government of Zimbabwe [53]. By integrating documentary analysis of local governance legislation, comparative resilience frameworks, and foresight methodologies, Murewa Rural District Council can position itself as a future-ready institution. Institutional resilience, when grounded in foresight, becomes not merely a defensive posture but a proactive strategy for sustainable local governance in volatile contexts, reflecting global calls for anticipatory governance articulated by the OECD [4] and climate adaptation imperatives outlined by the African Union [12].

Data Analysis Section

The data analysis for this study on future-proofing Murewa Rural District Council (MRDC) employed a qualitative, conceptual design that integrates multiple analytical lenses, including institutional theory, resilience governance, and strategic foresight UNDP [5]; World Bank [54]. Thus, documentary analysis of Zimbabwean local governance legislation and policy, particularly the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) and the Rural District Councils Act, which provided the foundational framework for understanding institutional mandates and constraints Government of Zimbabwe [55,56]. These statutes delineate devolved responsibilities, fiscal powers, and accountability mechanisms shaping rural local authorities. This was complemented by a comparative review of global municipal resilience frameworks, such as those advanced by the United Nations Development Programme and the Zimbabwe Resilience Building Fund (ZRBF), which emphasise adaptive, absorptive, and transformative capacities in local governance systems UNDP [5]; ZRBF [57]. By situating MRDC within both national and international resilience discourses, the analysis identified structural bottlenecks, including fiscal centralisation and climate vulnerability and opportunities for institutional strengthening through decentralised planning and participatory budgeting

(World Bank [54]; UN-Habitat [58]).

In actual fact, the foresight-based scenario mapping, guided by Voros [32] futures cone, enabled exploration of multiple plausible trajectories for MRDC under conditions of uncertainty. This approach highlights alternative futures ranging from collapse scenarios driven by fiscal stress and climate shocks to transformative pathways characterised by participatory governance and sustainable resource management IPCC [49]. Such scenario mapping is particularly relevant given the systemic challenges being faced by Zimbabwean local authorities, including financial constraints, weak accountability mechanisms, and limited citizen engagement World Bank [54]; TIZ [59]. The futures cone thus provided a structured method for anticipating risks while identifying strategic opportunities for resilience-building in fragile local governance contexts.

Thematic analysis, consistent with reflexive qualitative methodology Braun & Clarke [52], was applied to synthesise insights across documentary evidence, comparative frameworks, and foresight scenarios. Emerging themes include institutional adaptability, governance legitimacy, and community participation as critical determinants of resilience UNDP [5]; UN-Habitat [58]. Recent systematic reviews of local authority performance in Zimbabwe underscore the importance of these themes, noting that institutional resilience is closely tied to the ability of councils to balance regulatory compliance with innovative service delivery and transparent financial management TIZ [59]; World Bank [54]. The emphasis on analytical transferability rather than statistical generalisability ensured that findings are conceptually robust and applicable to broader debates on local governance resilience in sub-Saharan Africa IPCC [49]; UNDP [5]. Ultimately, this multi-layered analytical approach positioned MRDC within a dynamic resilience framework that integrates foresight, comparative learning, and thematic synthesis. By doing so, the study contributed to both academic discourse and practical policymaking, offering pathways for local authorities to anticipate disruptions and strengthen institutional resilience in the face of complex futures.

Findings

The findings indicate that MRDC's fiscal architecture remains structurally fragile, characterized by a narrow revenue base and high exposure to climatic and macroeconomic volatility because most rural local authorities in Zimbabwe continue to depend heavily on agriculture-linked revenues, rendering them vulnerable to drought cycles and rainfall variability that directly suppress household incomes and ratepayer compliance ZimLAC [60]; Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Fisheries, Water and Rural Development, 2024; NewZimbabwe [61]; Farmer's Weekly [62]. Thus, recent global and national assessments confirm that climate-induced agricultural shocks significantly erode subnational fiscal capacity in Southern Africa FAO [16] World Bank [11].

OCHA [63]. In Zimbabwe, inflationary pressures and exchange rate instability have further undermined budget credibility and fiscal predictability IMF [64]; RBZ [18]. For example, empirical studies on Zimbabwean rural councils underscore persistent revenue concentration in land taxes and agricultural levies, limiting diversification and resilience against macroeconomic shocks Chigwata [65] ZIMSTAT [66]. Consequently, MRDC's budgeting processes remain largely reactive, constraining its capacity for long-term capital planning and counter-cyclical fiscal management.

Climate vulnerability compounds fiscal fragility by intensifying infrastructure stress and rural poverty. The IPCC [67], highlights Southern Africa as a climate hotspot experiencing more frequent droughts, erratic rainfall, and rising temperatures. Whilst, complementary data from the World Meteorological Organization confirm escalating climate extremes across the region WMO [68]. At national level, Zimbabwe's Ministry of Environment, Climate and Wildlife (2024) reports increasing environmental degradation and water insecurity in semi-arid districts. For MRDC, these trends translate into recurrent strain on water supply systems, deteriorating rural roads, and declining agricultural productivity (.....). Although environmental and natural resource conservation by-laws were introduced in 2024, enforcement remains constrained by limited technical and financial capacity EMA [69]; Veritas Zimbabwe [70]. The convergence of climatic exposure and weak regulatory capacity thus entrenches systemic vulnerability (.....).

Digital and administrative deficiencies further undermine governance effectiveness. The UNDESA [71] emphasizes that digital transformation is central to enhancing transparency, revenue mobilization, and evidence-based policymaking in local governments. Similarly, the World Bank [17] notes that digitized financial management systems strengthen fiscal accountability and service delivery efficiency. However, MRDC's limited integration of information and communication technologies constrains revenue tracking, asset management, and citizen engagement. While some Zimbabwean municipalities have initiated e-governance pilots, rural councils lag behind due to infrastructural and skills deficits (Ministry of Information Communication Technology, Postal and Courier Services, 2024; Chitauro [72]. Data fragmentation and manual systems reduce planning precision and inhibit strategic foresight, thereby reinforcing administrative inertia Chitauro [72].

Infrastructure degradation represents an additional and interlinked constraint. Regional assessments by the African Development Bank [73] and the World Bank [11] identify chronic underinvestment and deferred maintenance as primary drivers of service delivery breakdowns in African local authorities. In Zimbabwe, aging boreholes, fragile rural road networks, and deteriorating sanitation facilities have heightened vulnerability to climate-induced disruptions UNICEF [74]; ZINWA [75]. Thus, the absence of systematic asset management frameworks within

MRDC has resulted in recurrent infrastructure failures, particularly in water systems critical for public health and livelihoods. These cascading disruptions not only elevate maintenance costs but also undermine institutional credibility and social resilience.

Finally, leadership and strategic planning limitations constrain MRDC's capacity to institutionalize resilience. The OECD [3] advocates anticipatory governance, scenario modelling, and stress testing as essential components of resilient public administration. Likewise, the UN-Habitat [76] emphasizes forward-looking urban and rural governance systems capable of integrating climate and fiscal risk into planning cycles. Although MRDC has aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals through a Voluntary Local Review roadmap, implementation gaps persist due to limited foresight competencies and insufficient leadership development UNDP [5]; Mutambisi & Chavunduka [2]; Chitauro [72]. The predominance of compliance-driven administrative culture over strategic innovation constrains transformative adaptation. Collectively, these findings reveal a multidimensional fragility in MRDC's fiscal, environmental, administrative, infrastructural, and governance systems, underscoring the urgent need for integrated resilience-oriented reforms.

Murewa Integrated Local Authority Foresight and Resilience Framework (MILAFRF) (Figure 1)

Source: Author

Strategic foresight has increasingly been recognised as a foundational capability for strengthening institutional resilience in public sector systems Chihobvu [1]. In the context of the Murewa Rural District Council (MRDC), the proposed Murewa Integrated Local Authority Foresight and Resilience Framework (MILAFRF) conceptualise the council as a complex adaptive system operating within dynamic socio-economic, climatic, and fiscal environments. Drawing on anticipatory governance theory, strategic foresight, that is, through structured horizon scanning, scenario analysis, and risk anticipation, feeds directly into leadership decision-making processes, enabling proactive rather than reactive governance OECD [3]; Chihobvu [1]. As emphasised by the OECD [4], embedding foresight in public institutions enhances policy coherence, long-term planning capacity, and preparedness for systemic shocks. Within MRDC, foresight thus becomes the catalytic input that shapes adaptive leadership and strengthens resilience capacities for sustainable service delivery Chihobvu [1].

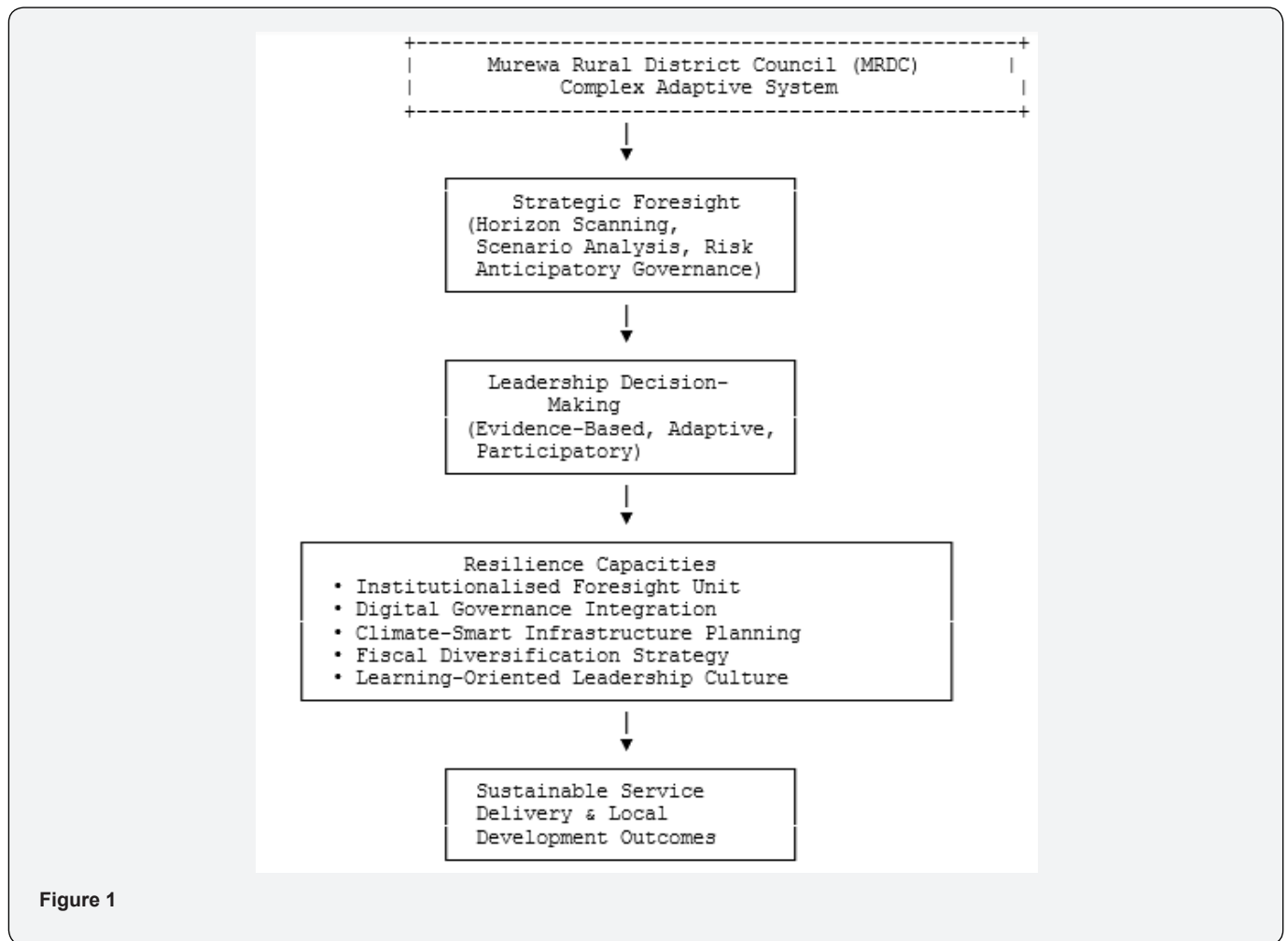


Figure 1

In the case of Murewa Rural District Council, the first pillar of the framework is the establishment of an Institutionalised Foresight Unit. This dedicated structure would institutionalise horizon scanning, scenario development, and stress-testing of strategic plans against climate, economic, and demographic uncertainties. In this case, institutionalisation ensures continuity beyond political cycles and supports evidence-informed decision-making, consistent with anticipatory governance models OECD [4]; Chihobvu [1]. Complementing this is Digital Governance Integration, which focuses on interoperable revenue collection, financial management, and asset management systems OECD [4]; World Bank [11]. In addition, digital transformation enhances transparency, accountability, and efficiency, thereby increasing fiscal resilience and reducing systemic vulnerabilities OECD [4]; Chihobvu [1]. Furthermore, the World Bank [11] underscores that digital public infrastructure is central to strengthening local government effectiveness and revenue mobilisation in developing economies. For MRDC, integrated digital systems would improve financial predictability and resource allocation under uncertainty.

That said, the third pillar in this study is Climate-Smart Infrastructure Planning, which directly addresses the climate risks facing rural Zimbabwe, particularly drought, flooding, and infrastructure degradation IPCC [49]; World Bank [11]. Zimbabwe has experienced intensified El Niño-induced droughts and episodic flooding affecting rural districts, reinforcing the urgency of anticipatory infrastructure planning ZMSD [77]; UNDRR [78]. Additionally, resilient water systems, drought-resistant technologies, and climate-adaptive road designs represent anticipatory investments aligned with global climate adaptation frameworks advanced by the IPCC [49]. Thus, integrating climate projections into district development plans reduces long-term recovery costs and enhances service continuity UNDP [5]; African Development Bank [12]. Closely linked is the Fiscal Diversification Strategy, aimed at reducing overdependence on agriculture-based revenues World Bank [54]; FAO [16]. Through local economic development initiatives such as value addition, small-scale industrialisation, and public-private partnerships, therefore, MRDC can expand its revenue base, improving financial stability and absorptive capacity during economic shocks UNECA [79]; OECD [4]. Thus, such diversification aligns with resilience scholarship that emphasises redundancy and resource diversity as core adaptive features of complex systems (United Nations., 2022).

In this Murewa Integrated Local Authority Foresight and Resilience Framework (MILAFRF), the fifth pillar, a Learning-Oriented Leadership Culture, provides the integrative mechanism binding the framework together UNDP [19]; OECD [4]. In this case, adaptive governance literature stresses continuous evaluation, experimentation, feedback loops, and institutional learning as prerequisites for resilience OECD [4]. Within MRDC, leadership that promotes reflective practice, data-driven review,

and stakeholder participation strengthens adaptive capacity and social legitimacy World Bank [11] UNODRR., 2022). When strategic foresight informs leadership decisions, which in turn activate institutional, digital, infrastructural, fiscal, and cultural capacities, the system evolves toward sustainable service delivery IPCC [49]. In this sense, the MILAFRF operationalises resilience not as a static outcome but as a dynamic capability and one that enables MRDC to anticipate disruptions, absorb shocks, adapt to change, and transform where necessary to secure long-term local development UNDP [5]; African Development Bank [12].

Discussion

Applying a strategic foresight lens to the operations of the Murewa Rural District Council (MRDC) reveals that its vulnerabilities are systemic rather than isolated administrative deficiencies. In this situation, the fiscal instability, climate exposure, digital underdevelopment, and infrastructure decay operate through reinforcing feedback loops that heighten institutional fragility World Bank [11]; OECD [4]. For instance, declining revenue undermines infrastructure maintenance, which in turn reduces service quality, lowers citizen compliance, and further erodes revenue collection capacity IMF [64]. Such dynamics reflect what the OECD [4] describes as governance systems trapped in reactive cycles due to limited anticipatory capacity. Strategic foresight reframes this trajectory by identifying leverage points that can interrupt negative spirals and strengthen institutional resilience Chihobvu [1]. These include diversifying revenue streams, digitising billing and revenue management systems, integrating climate adaptation into infrastructure planning, and establishing early-warning mechanisms for fiscal and environmental risk UNDP [5]; World Bank [11]. Embedding foresight practices within Murewa Rural District Council (MRDC) could therefore shift governance culture from short-term crisis management toward proactive adaptation and long-term value preservation OECD [4]; UNDP [5].

In this study, the findings also indicate that MRDC's fiscal fragility is rooted in a narrow and climate-sensitive revenue base. As a predominantly rural authority in Zimbabwe, its income depends heavily on agriculture-linked ratepayers whose capacity fluctuates with climatic conditions and commodity markets FAO [16]. Thus, periodic droughts and rainfall variability directly reduce agricultural output, weakening household incomes and municipal revenue flows IPCC [67]. In addition, budgeting processes remain annualised and inflation-sensitive, limiting long-term capital planning and investment smoothing IMF [64]. According to the IMF [64], subnational governments in climate-exposed economies face heightened fiscal volatility when revenue systems lack diversification and medium-term expenditure frameworks. Thus, without structural reforms, such as expanding non-agricultural revenue sources and strengthening financial forecasting, MRDC remains vulnerable to cyclical shocks that compound over time.

Climate vulnerability further intensifies these fiscal pressures. The IPCC [67] identifies Southern Africa as a hotspot for increasing drought frequency, rainfall variability, and temperature extremes, all of which threaten water systems, road infrastructure, and agricultural productivity. In MRDC's context, aging boreholes, deteriorating rural roads, and fragile waste management systems amplify exposure to climate stressors, raising maintenance costs and increasing the risk of cascading service disruptions (UNODRR, 2023). These physical vulnerabilities are compounded by digital and administrative gaps. Limited digitisation constrains revenue collection efficiency, asset management, service tracking, and citizen engagement, while fragmented data systems weaken evidence-based planning World Bank [11]. The World Bank [11] underscores that digital transformation in local governments enhances transparency, improves collection efficiency, and strengthens adaptive capacity—benefits that remain largely untapped within MRDC.

Leadership and strategic planning constraints represent an additional systemic weakness. Existing strategic plans tend to emphasise compliance and short-term crisis response rather than scenario modelling, stress testing, or long-term resilience building OECD [4]; UNDP [5]. Globally, municipalities that integrate foresight tools such as horizon scanning, scenario planning, and risk dashboards demonstrate improved policy coherence and institutional agility OECD [4]. Institutionalising foresight within Murewa Rural District Council would therefore require cultural transformation alongside technical reform. By embedding anticipatory governance mechanisms, strengthening digital infrastructure, and mainstreaming climate adaptation into capital planning, MRDC could transition from reactive survival to structured resilience Chihobvu [1]; UNDRR [7]. In doing so, it would not only stabilise service delivery but also future-proof local governance against accelerating environmental, fiscal, and socio-economic uncertainty IPCC [67]; World Bank [11].

1. Policy Recommendations

The increasing volatility of climatic, economic, and governance environments necessitates that local authorities adopt anticipatory and adaptive governance models. For the Murewa Rural District Council (MRDC), positioning itself as a complex adaptive system offers a practical pathway to institutional resilience and sustainable service delivery OECD [4]; UNDP [5]. The proposed Murewa Integrated Local Authority Foresight and Resilience Framework conceptualise strategic foresight as the catalytic mechanism that informs leadership decision-making, strengthens resilience capacities, and enhances long-term development outcomes OECD [4]; WEF, 2024). Thus, by embedding foresight, digital innovation, climate adaptation, fiscal diversification, and adaptive leadership into its governance architecture, MRDC can transition from reactive administration to proactive and future-oriented local governance UNDP [5] World Bank [11].

First, institutionalising foresight mechanisms within MRDC's planning cycles is essential for strengthening anticipatory governance. Establishing a dedicated Foresight Unit responsible for horizon scanning, scenario development, and policy stress-testing would align local strategic planning with emerging socio-economic and environmental uncertainties OECD [4]; UNDP [5]. The OECD [4] emphasises that embedding strategic foresight within public institutions enhances preparedness, agility, and evidence-informed decision-making. For MRDC, integrating scenario planning into budgeting and infrastructure development cycles would improve long-term policy coherence and reduce vulnerability to shocks such as droughts, migration shifts, or fiscal disruptions World Bank [11]; African Development Bank [80]. Second, digital governance integration should be prioritised to strengthen transparency, efficiency, and revenue mobilisation. The adoption of interoperable digital revenue collection and asset management systems can improve billing accuracy, reduce leakages, and enhance compliance World Bank [11]; UNDP [5]. According to the World Bank [11], digital transformation in local governments significantly increases fiscal capacity and accountability, particularly in resource-constrained contexts. For MRDC, digitised platforms would not only improve internal financial management but also build citizen trust through transparent service delivery systems OECD [4]. This reform complements the proposed fiscal diversification strategy aimed at reducing dependence on rain-fed agriculture by promoting local economic development initiatives and broadening the revenue base African Development Bank [80]; RBZ, 2023).

Third, climate-smart infrastructure planning is indispensable given Zimbabwe's heightened exposure to climate variability. Aligning infrastructure development with climate risk projections, particularly in water systems and road networks, would enhance long-term resilience IPCC [67]; FAO [16]. The IPCC [67] underscores the urgency of integrating climate adaptation into subnational planning frameworks, while the FAO [16] advocates for drought-resilient water management systems in rural districts. For MRDC, investing in drought-resistant water infrastructure and resilient road designs would safeguard essential services and protect livelihoods World Bank [11]; African Development Bank [80]. Complementing this technical adaptation with strengthened intergovernmental and regional collaboration, particularly through Southern African municipal networks such as United Cities and Local Governments of Africa, would facilitate knowledge exchange, pooled expertise, and coordinated resilience strategies (UCLG Africa, 2024).

Finally, cultivating a learning-oriented leadership culture is critical to sustaining institutional transformation. Adaptive leadership and systems thinking training for council officials would foster experimentation, continuous evaluation, and responsive governance OECD [4]; sss, 2024). Institutional resilience is not solely structural but behavioural and therefore requires leaders capable of navigating complexity and uncertainty UNDP [5].

Moreover, embedding continuous monitoring, performance review mechanisms, and iterative policy adjustment would reinforce MRDC's capacity to evolve in response to emerging risks World Bank [11]; African Development Bank [80]. Collectively, these reforms operationalise the foresight–resilience–service delivery nexus and position MRDC as a model for future-ready rural local governance in Southern Africa [81-120].

Conclusion

Future-proofing Murewa Rural District Council requires a paradigm shift from reactive administration to anticipatory governance. Strategic foresight provides the analytical architecture for embedding resilience across fiscal, infrastructural, digital, and environmental domains. By institutionalising foresight, strengthening adaptive leadership, and integrating systemic resilience principles, MRDC can transition toward sustainable, citizen-centred, and future-ready local governance. The framework developed in this study contributes to public administration scholarship by positioning strategic foresight as a foundational capability for resilient local authorities in developing contexts [121-162].

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