

Unrealised Spatial Governance: Diagnosing the Failure to Prioritise Spatial Planning in South Africa's Northern Cape Province

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Key words: Spatial transformation, spatial governance, spatial planning instruments, plan quality, organisational quality, meta-governance

SUMMARY

Spatial planning is legally mandated in South Africa through the SPLUMA (Act 16 of 2013), yet in the Northern Cape the Provincial Spatial Development Framework (PSDF) has limited practical influence on departmental planning, budgeting and public investment decisions. This paper diagnoses this gap as 'unrealised spatial governance': statutory spatial instruments exist but are not sufficiently internalised as authoritative governance tools within provincial decision-making. Using a pragmatist mixed-method design, the study applies a governance-focused analytical framework comprising three dimensions, planning system quality, plan quality and organisational quality, to examine why spatial planning is not prioritised in the Northern Cape Provincial Government.

The findings show that planning system quality is weakened by 'rules of the game' that are poorly enacted in practice, alongside systemic deficiencies across a typical planning system's components, including institutional authority and competences, legal frameworks, planning instruments and monitoring mechanisms. Plan quality analysis indicates that the PSDF is often treated as a compliance reference rather than a binding, statutory coordinating instrument: participation in PSDF processes is limited, cross-sector alignment is inconsistent, investment decisions are rarely plan-led and monitoring feedback loops are weak. Organisational quality findings further demonstrate that limited internal capacity reflected in resourcing and expenditure patterns, vacant professional posts, and an underdeveloped performance indicator architecture, reduces the province's ability to embed plan-led governance routines.

The expected contribution is a clear, replicable diagnostic account of how spatial planning can fail despite legal mandate, highlighting recognition and regard for spatial planning and spatial instruments as a key condition for implementation. The paper concludes with practical recommendations to strengthen institutional authority, align budgets and departmental plans to the PSDF, embed monitoring with spatial indicators, and improve interdepartmental coordination, directly supporting FIG Commission 8 discussions on spatial governance as a mechanism linking land use, public investment, and sustainable development "beyond 2030."

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Post-apartheid South Africa continues to grapple with spatial inequality and fragmentation, which undermine national efforts toward inclusive development and spatial transformation. To address these challenges, the country adopted the National Development Plan (NDP) in 2012. Chapter 8 of the NDP specifically calls for transforming human settlements and the national spatial economy by building a strong and efficient spatial planning system, integrated across all spheres of government (National Planning Commission, 2012: 259). The Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA), Act 16 of 2013, was promulgated to give legislative effect to this goal, amongst others. It provides a unified framework for spatial planning and formalises spatial development frameworks (SDFs), including provincial SDFs (PSDFs), as instruments for guiding and coordinating land development, infrastructure investment and spatial transformation. The SPLUMA envisages a planning regime where these statutory instruments inform decision-making and promote sustainable development.

Within this framework, the Northern Cape Province, the largest but sparsely populated province in South Africa, faces distinct spatial development challenges. Despite the existence of a formal legal mandate and approved provincial spatial planning instruments, the province continues to experience high levels of poverty, unemployment and limited infrastructure development. These challenges are compounded by dispersed settlements, climate vulnerabilities, institutional fragmentation and capacity constraints. The Provincial Growth and Development Plan (PGDP, 2018) acknowledges that spatial transformation remains largely unrealised in the province (Northern Cape Office of the Premier, 2018: 5). This highlights the need to understand not just the existence of planning instruments, but their use or lack thereof in practice in this province.

1.2. Problem Statement and Rationale

Although the SPLUMA provides a statutory foundation for spatial planning, its implementation at the provincial level remains weak. In the Northern Cape, the statutory provincial spatial development framework (PSDF) as the primary spatial planning instrument, is often bypassed in favour of non-legislated policy documents, strategies, or ad hoc frameworks. Departmental plans and budgets frequently fail to align with the PSDF, undermining coordination, investment rationalisation and spatial justice. The issue, therefore, is not the absence of policy or

instruments, but a deeper governance failure. Institutional fragmentation, overlapping mandates, low levels of participation and weak internal capacity have collectively hindered the institutionalisation of spatial planning in the Northern Cape Province. This paper conceptualises this condition as ‘unrealised spatial governance,’ a scenario where statutory planning tools exist structurally, but are not embedded in the internal operations, decision-making, or political priorities of this provincial government. Understanding why this disjuncture persists in the Northern Cape is crucial for improving the province’s ability to achieve spatial transformation through sustainable development, especially in the context of increasing pressures around climate change, infrastructure demands and socio-economic inequality.

1.3. Study Objectives and Relevance to the FIG Congress 2026

The study critically examines why spatial development planning is weakly implemented in the Northern Cape, focusing on the gap between statutory planning instruments and their uptake in provincial governance. It pursues three aims: (1) to describe how provincial spatial planning operates within South Africa’s integrated planning system and assess alignment with the SPLUMA, including whether non-SPLUMA instruments are substituting for formal spatial planning tools; (2) to assess the extent to which political and administrative actors understand, support and use spatial instruments such as the PSDF; and (3) to analyse organisational conditions that limit the institutionalisation of spatial planning, including capacity constraints, role confusion, resourcing and accountability, and to define a minimum organisational structure for spatial planning. The study applies a governance-focused framework (planning system, plan quality and organisational quality) and is grounded in internal meta-governance, assessing whether the province acts effectively as a meta-governor. The study is underpinned by meta-governance theory, particularly internal meta-governance which is the ability of the state (in this case, the Northern Cape Government) to steer, coordinate, and institutionalise planning functions across departments. It asks whether the provincial government is acting as a meta-governor, responsible for embedding spatial planning in public investment and decision-making, or whether institutional constraints prevent this role from materialising.

The insights presented in this paper are especially relevant to the FIG Commission 8 community, which focuses on spatial planning instruments, governance and sustainable development. By documenting the challenges of spatial governance in a sub-national South African context, the paper contributes to international debates on planning failures in contexts where spatial instruments are legally mandated but poorly implemented. It offers a conceptual lens and empirical evidence for understanding why such failures occur and what institutional conditions are necessary for successful spatial governance.

2. SPATIAL PLANNING

2.1. Evolution and Purpose of Spatial Planning

Spatial planning has evolved from its traditional function as a regulatory mechanism for land use control toward a more strategic and integrative governance function (Nadin et al., 2018: 7). It now serves as a tool for guiding development decisions, coordinating infrastructure investments and promoting sectoral integration (Acheampong, 2018: 12). Spatial planning enables the state to shape the spatial organisation of society by aligning economic, social and environmental objectives within a coherent territorial framework (Acheampong, 2018: 12).

Contemporary planning discourse, especially in developing contexts, positions spatial planning as a key instrument for addressing deeply entrenched spatial inequality and transformation (Du Plessis, 2019: 106). In South Africa, this role is particularly pronounced due to the persistent spatial legacies of apartheid, which have produced fragmented settlements, racially segregated urban forms, and unequal access to services and opportunities. The National Development Plan (NDP, 2012) and the SPLUMA (Act 16 of 2013) were introduced as corrective policy and legislative responses to this spatial injustice, aiming to foster inclusive, integrated, and sustainable spatial development.

The SPLUMA explicitly formalised spatial development frameworks (SDFs) as statutory planning instruments at national, provincial, and municipal levels (Department of Rural Development and Land Reform, 2013: 12). These instruments are intended to guide public investment, facilitate intersectoral coordination, and embed spatial logic into governance processes. As noted in the current study, the PSDF should ideally serve as the central statutory mechanism for aligning all departmental strategies, resource allocation, and development programmes at the provincial level. However, despite these formal, statutory provisions, the practical institutionalisation of spatial planning remains weak, especially in provinces such as the Northern Cape.

The challenges associated with spatial planning implementation in the South African context are well documented. These include misalignment between spatial and sectoral plans, limited institutional capacity, poor political support, confusion on the purpose of SDFs and a tendency to treat SDFs as compliance documents rather than functional instruments for governance (Du Plessis, 2019: 109; Kimberly, 2015: ii). As observed in the current study, the PSDF in the Northern Cape is not effectively integrated into departmental planning processes, and spatial planning is often deprioritised in both policy and budgeting cycles.

2.2. Spatial Planning, Governance and Institutional Alignment

Governance refers to the structures, rules, processes, and relationships through which decisions are made, implemented, and evaluated (Stephan, Marshall and McGinnis, 2019 in Thiel et al., 2019: 24). In the context of spatial planning, governance encompasses not only the formal institutions responsible for planning, but also the informal networks, actors and interactions that influence planning outcome. Effective governance requires coordination across

departments, spheres and sectors; clearly defined roles and responsibilities; and mechanisms for accountability and oversight.

In South Africa, the Constitution and the SPLUMA prescribe a cooperative governance model. This implies that national, provincial and local governments must work together in fulfilling their planning mandates. However, institutional fragmentation and the lack of a shared vision frequently undermine spatial coherence. As highlighted in the current study, departments often operate in silos, with overlapping mandates and inconsistent interpretations of planning authority. This results in a disconnect between planning law and practice, where statutory instruments like the PSDF exist in form but are not embedded in the governance machinery.

2.3. Meta-Governance and Internal Meta-Governance

To better understand these implementation failures, the current study adopts a meta-governance lens. Meta-governance refers to the ‘governance of governance,’ the ability of central institutions to shape, coordinate, and steer other governance actors and systems (Ansell and Torfing, 2016 in Navarro, 2022: 13). It goes beyond direct control and instead focuses on the tools, frameworks, and institutional arrangements through which governance is enabled and structured. This concept of meta-governance is particularly useful in complex governance environments where authority is dispersed across multiple actors and institutions (Gjaltema et al., 2019: 1771), as is the case in spatial planning. Meta-governance allows for an analysis of how planning instruments are framed, legitimated and institutionalised or conversely, how they are marginalised despite legal mandates.

Within this broader theoretical frame, the current study focuses on internal meta-governance. This concept refers specifically to the state’s ability to manage and coordinate its own departments and agencies in implementing a shared planning vision (Meuleman, 2006: 1). Internal meta-governance as utilised in the study assesses whether government possesses the institutional architecture, culture and capacity to act as a central coordinator and enabler of planning functions. It includes the ability to clarify roles, align strategies and budgets, ensure accountability and institutionalise planning instruments across departments.

As applied in this study, internal meta-governance is not only about legal compliance, but about the internal steering mechanisms that make spatial planning work in practice. The analysis therefore focuses on whether the Northern Cape Provincial Government is fulfilling its role as a meta-governor, a central actor capable of embedding the PSDF in its organisational structures, planning routines, and resource allocation processes. The findings suggest that internal meta-governance in the Northern Cape is weakly manifested, contributing to fragmented implementation and diminished authority of spatial planning as a public policy tool.

2.4. Analytical Framework: Assessing Spatial Governance

Building on existing literature for spatial planning and planning theory, the current study applies a three-dimensional analytical framework for assessing spatial planning implementation and governance. These dimensions were developed from planning and

governance theory and adapted to reflect the specific conditions and challenges observed in the Northern Cape. They allow for a comprehensive and structured analysis of spatial governance, moving beyond policy rhetoric to institutional and procedural realities

2.4.1. Planning System Quality (research Dimension 1)

This dimension assesses the broader planning system, including the legislative framework, institutional roles, and procedural rules. It asks whether the province has the necessary legal and institutional foundation to support spatial planning, whether roles are clearly defined, and whether there are mechanisms for coordination and compliance. In the Northern Cape, this dimension reveals confusion around institutional authority, particularly between COGHSTA and the Office of the Premier, both of which assert responsibility for planning functions.

2.4.2. Plan Quality (Research Dimension 2)

The second dimension focuses on the quality, status, and influence of the PSDF as the central planning instrument. It examines whether the PSDF is used in practice to guide strategic planning, align budgets, and inform public investment decisions. The study found that the PSDF is often overlooked in favour of non-statutory documents, with weak participation from departments during its review and implementation (Acheampong, 2019: 11; Du Plessis, 2019: 106).

2.4.3. Organisational Quality (Research Dimension 3)

The third dimension assesses internal organisational capacity, including human resource capacity, budget provision, institutional culture and performance systems. It analyses whether the government has the tools and resources needed to institutionalise planning instruments. In the Northern Cape, the study found consistent under-spending on spatial planning, unfilled professional posts, and a lack of clear performance indicators linked to planning outcomes.

Together, these dimensions provide a holistic framework for understanding why spatial planning remains unrealised in the Northern Cape, despite the existence of the SPLUMA and the PSDF. By applying meta-governance theory to the empirical realities of sub-national planning, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of governance challenges in spatial transformation. These insights are particularly relevant for the FIG community, which seeks to understand the links between land use, spatial governance and sustainable development.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a pragmatist research philosophy to examine how spatial development planning is institutionalised within the Northern Cape Provincial Government. Pragmatism supports a flexible, outcomes-focused approach suited to complex governance contexts, enabling the study to draw on multiple data sources to understand both formal and informal factors shaping spatial planning implementation at provincial level. A mixed-method research design is applied, integrating qualitative and quantitative components. Analysis is structured

through a governance-focused framework comprising three dimensions: planning system quality, plan quality, and organisational quality. Planning system quality examines the legal and institutional arrangements underpinning spatial planning, including mandate clarity, intergovernmental coherence and alignment with the SPLUMA. Plan quality focuses on the PSDF's status and practical influence, including its integration into departmental planning and budgeting, its role in guiding investment decisions, and the inclusivity of its development and review processes. Organisational quality assesses internal governance capacity, including staffing, resourcing, role clarity, institutional memory and performance management. The study uses document analysis of provincial departmental strategic plans, annual reports, and sector strategies; a survey questionnaire of senior government officials and content analysis of departmental documents to assess how spatial concepts are embedded in policy and planning language. Qualitative findings are translated into measurable results through analysis matrices using an unweighted composite index, enabling structured comparison of compliance and capacity across indicators. The study is theoretically grounded in internal meta-governance, focusing on the state's capacity to coordinate its institutions and embed planning instruments in routine governance. Ethical safeguards included anonymisation and use of publicly available documents.

4. FINDINGS IN BRIEF

4.1. Planning System Quality

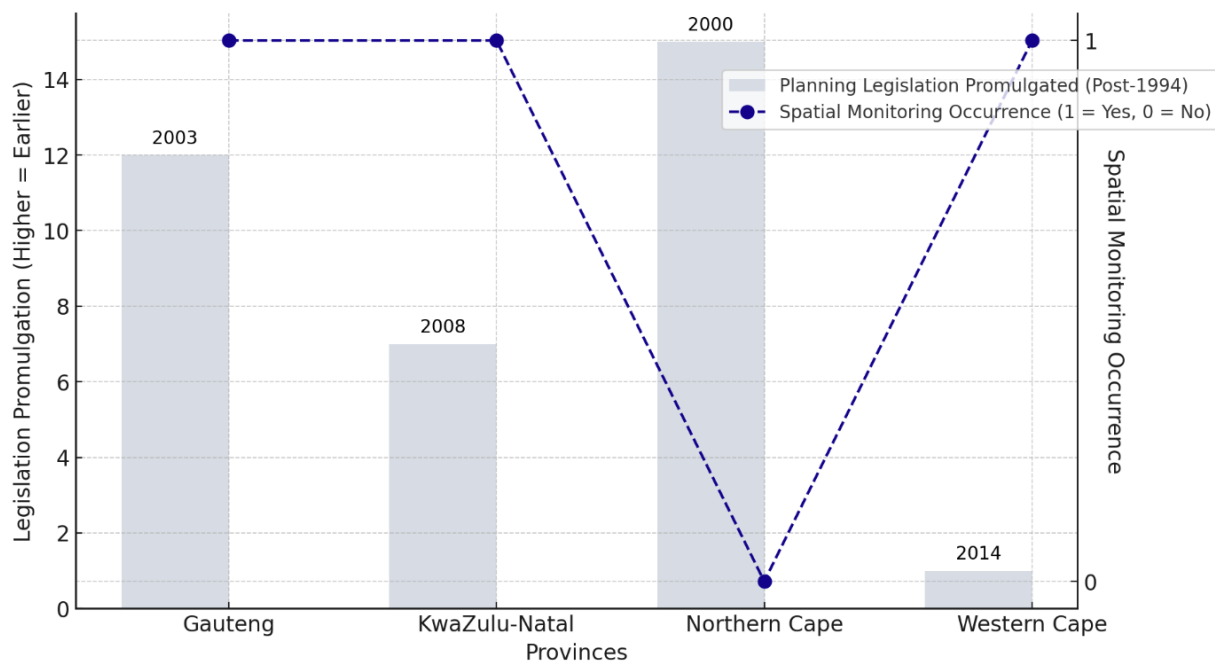
'Planning System Quality' which constitutes Research Dimension 1 of the study, is analysed as the extent to which the Northern Cape's spatial planning system reflects (i) the governing 'rules of the game' for spatial planning as public policy, and (ii) the key components of a functioning spatial planning system, as derived from planning theory. The analysis is operationalised through an analysis matrix that translates qualitative evidence into a quantified compliance profile using an unweighted composite index (4 = fully compliant; 3 = mostly compliant; 2 = partially compliant; 1 = non-compliant) as already discussed in the methodology section above.

4.1.1. Setting the 'Rules of the Game'

In the study, the concept of 'rules of the game' is adopted from governance and meta-governance scholarship. These 'rules of the game' comprise establishing the fundamental principles for governance which ensures that all the different systems and procedures part of the governance process, are compatible (Hammond et al., 2019: 1151). It also encompasses setting controls in place to compel all actors involved in public policy, to comply with the 'rules of the game' (Hammond et al., 2019: 1151). Governments use meta-governance strategies to control and manage the implementation of state policy and that this in turn influences the actions, practices and decisions of all relevant actors participating in the policy issue (Hooge et al., 2022: 1591). Subsequently, the legislative frameworks of governments, governance practices and processes which governments use to enforce governance in public administration, are regarded as the 'rules of the game' for the purposes of this research study which is then applied in the public policy of spatial planning.

For the purposes of the empirical analysis in the study, identifying the ‘rules of the game’ in Research Dimension 1, is explicitly twofold: (a) the ‘rules of the game’ derived from the Northern Cape Planning and Development Act (Act 7 of 1998); and (b) those derived from the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA, Act 16 of 2013). These statutory provisions are selected because the study analyses spatial planning as a statutory public function that should be institutionally embedded in provincial government and governed through structured institutional arrangements, legal obligations and plan-led implementation whereby the provincial SDF is regarded as “the plan” leading the implementation of decisions affecting the spatial economy of the province. Act 7 of 1998 was incorporated since it has never repealed by the province and accordingly continues to influence the formal spatial planning mandate within the Northern Cape. Its analysis reveals that, although the province was initially progressive in implementing post-apartheid planning legislation (see Graph 1), it was unable to maintain this momentum by effectively adapting to subsequent planning reforms and institutionalising a mature spatial planning function, for example the robust monitoring of spatial indicators.

Graph 1: Early Progressive Post-Apartheid Planning Legislation (Northern Cape)

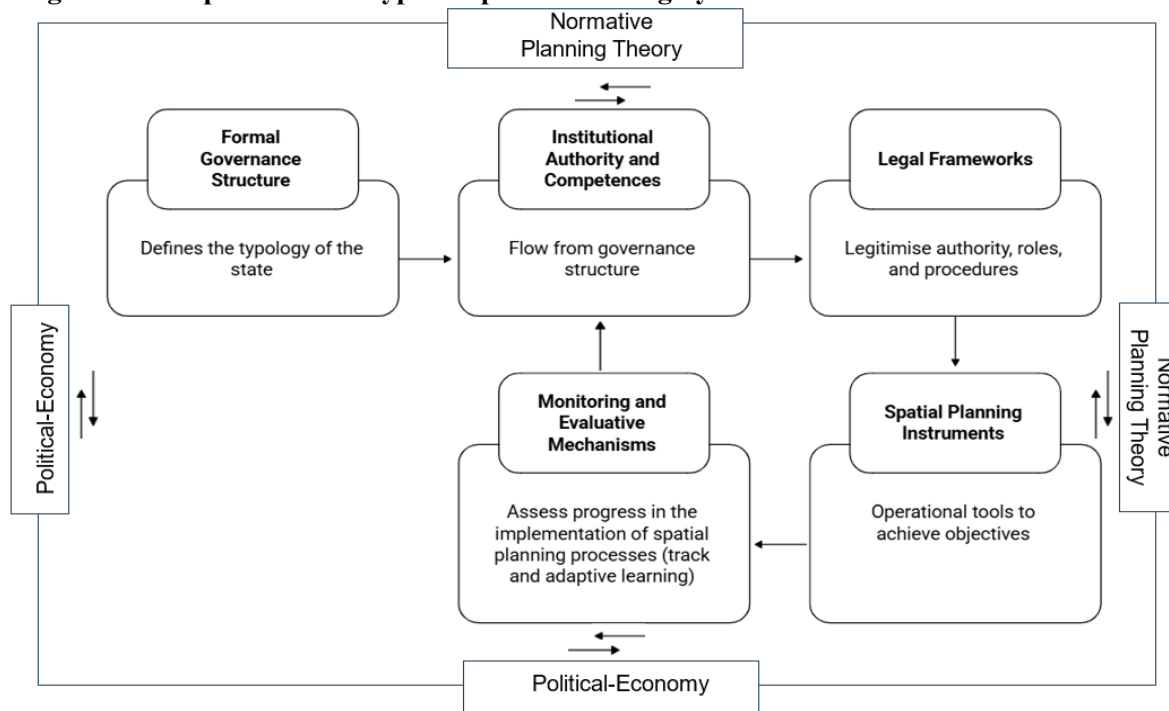


The identification of ‘rules of the game’ is, therefore, not regarded as a descriptive list of legal sections, but rather as an analytical mechanism in which selected legislative requirements are used to establish an analysis matrix, in Research Dimension 1, depicting legal requirements for the spatial planning system of the Northern Cape and the related practices and procedures. against which the province’s adherence to statutory planning governance can be analysed across Research Dimensions 2 and 3 (plan quality and organisational quality).

4.1.2. Components of the Northern Cape Spatial Planning System

The spatial planning system of the Northern Cape is analysed in relation to five components of a typical spatial planning system, primarily based on Acheampong's (2019: 22) constituents of a typical spatial planning system and adapted to align with the study's governance emphasis.

Figure 1: Components of a Typical Spatial Planning System



(Source: Adapted from Acheampong, 2018: 21)

As illustrated in Figure 1, four core components, namely the 'national governance structure,' 'institutional authority and competencies,' 'legal frameworks' and spatial planning instruments' are identified as interconnected system elements that enable and facilitate effective planning. The present study considers these as foundational elements and further enhances them by incorporating the fifth component of 'monitoring and evaluative mechanisms' (Stead and Nadin, 2008: ??), based on the premise that monitoring establishes feedback loops, enhances accountability and transforms the planning system from a static structure into a dynamic governance cycle through adaptive learning.

In the Northern Cape, the planning system operates within South Africa's national governance structure, which determines how planning powers are distributed across spheres of government. This structure is a given context for the Northern Cape Provincial Government and frames what the province is able—and required—to do in relation to provincial spatial planning. Against this backdrop, the study finds that the Northern Cape's most significant system weakness lies

in institutional authority and competences. Spatial planning responsibilities have not been clearly clarified or fully institutionalised in line with SPLUMA requirements, which constrains the province's ability to prioritise and implement spatial planning as a governance function. Outdated delegations rooted in Act 7 of 1998 remain in place without being formally reissued under SPLUMA's delegation framework, leaving planning authority unclear. This is compounded by the practical split in the planning function between COGHSTA (as custodian of provincial planning legislation) and the Office of the Premier (responsible for PSDF implementation and monitoring), contributing to role confusion, weak coordination and poor governance outcomes. The legal framework further undermines the system: the province has not promulgated SPLUMA-aligned planning legislation to replace Act 7 of 1998, despite the recognised legal risk arising from Act 7's dependence on the DFA, parts of which were declared unconstitutional. Although drafting support was provided as early as 2011–2012, replacement legislation remained incomplete and Act 7 unrepealed by 2025. Regarding spatial planning instruments, the province eventually produced provincial SDFs, but implementation was delayed and the PSDF has had limited influence on sector planning and implementation. Finally, monitoring and evaluative mechanisms are weakly institutionalised, limiting accountability, learning and sustained plan-led governance. Overall, the Northern Cape exhibits formal system elements, but persistent legal uncertainty, fragmented authority and weak monitoring undermine the internalisation and enforceability of spatial planning as statutory public policy.

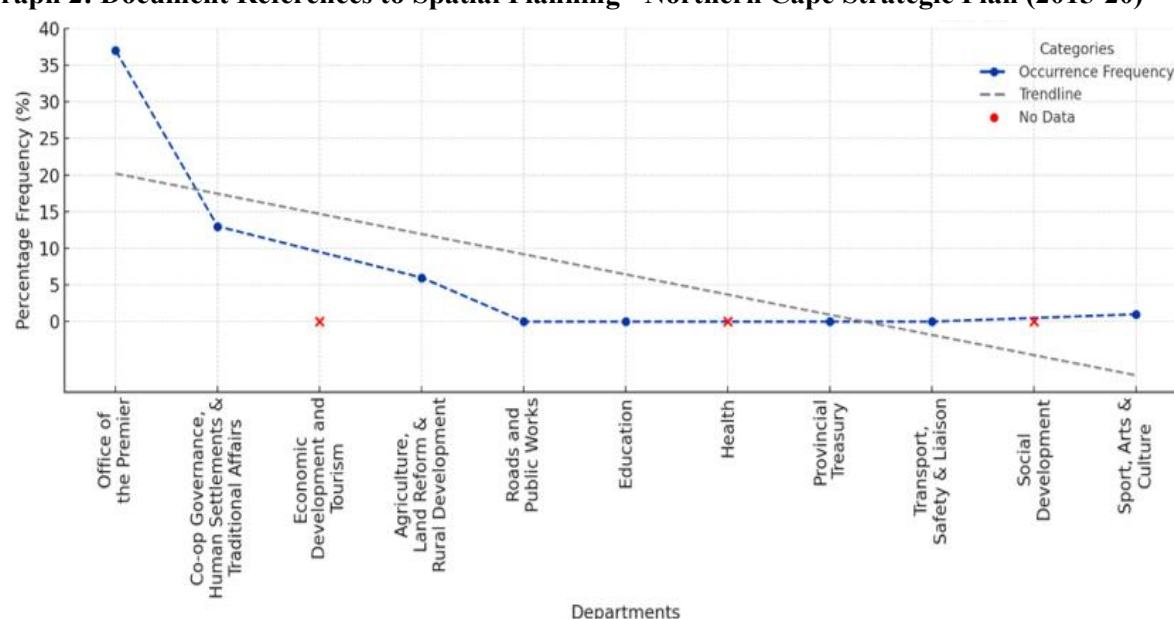
4.2. Plan Quality

'Plan Quality,' Research Dimension 2, is analysed in the study as the extent to which the provincial spatial development framework (PSDF) functions as the province's primary statutory spatial planning instrument in practice. This analysis is conducted from the perspective of whether the PSDF is valued as a statutory governance instrument, developed through meaningful and inclusive participation processes, utilised in sector planning and decision-making and supported by coordination and monitoring institutional arrangements.

Conceptually, plan quality in this study is concerned not only with the technical content of the PSDF, but with the institutional processes and actor behaviours through which the plan is developed, internalised and operationalised across the Northern Cape Provincial Government. The findings display that, although the SPLUMA recognises provincial SDFs as statutory instruments intended to guide land development and public investment, the Northern Cape PSDF is not consistently treated as an authoritative plan within provincial governance approaches of the province. Government departments often regard it as a compliance requirement or a peripheral reference rather than an instrument with a sufficient legal mandate and institutional influence, to shape development priorities. In practice, non-statutory strategies (continuously being introduced by national government departments) and sector plans frequently take precedence, displacing the PSDF's intended coordinating role.

A second key finding concerns limited ‘meaningful participation’ in the development and review of statutory spatial plans. Participation is weak in key planning fora and engagement processes, undermining cross-sectoral ownership and legitimacy. Because the PSDF is not co-produced as an interdepartmental framework, it lacks the institutional commitment needed for implementation, resulting in a plan that is formally adopted but not fully “owned” across government. Thirdly, the study analyses ‘plan quality’ through the utilisation of the PSDF, focusing on alignment and decision-making with this primary spatial plan. Content analysis and structured scoring of Northern Cape provincial departmental strategic plans (see Figure , annual performance plans, annual reports and sector plans reveal a persistent misalignment in this regard in that departments frequently express sector objectives without translating the priorities of the PSDF into spatially targeted outcomes, budget logic or implementation commitments.

Graph 2: Document References to Spatial Planning - Northern Cape Strategic Plan (2015-20)



The PSDF also has limited influence on practical investment decisions, as project location, sequencing and prioritisation give limited expression of PSDF development corridors or strategic areas. Subsequently, the PSDF’s coordinating function is weakened. Rather than operating as a shared framework that streamlines state action and reduces contradictory initiatives, coordination often occurs through ad hoc processes, informal negotiation, or parallel strategies that do not converge on a common spatial logic. This contributes to fragmented planning and limited spatial coherence across departments in the province. Finally, weak monitoring and evaluation further reduces plan credibility and authority. Where feedback loops are absent or minimal, spatial priorities are not translated into measurable routines and there is limited capacity to assess alignment or progress. Overall, the PSDF is formally established but

functionally marginal, reflecting a broader failure to institutionalise spatial planning as a core public policy instrument in the Northern Cape.

4.3. Organisational Quality (Governance Capacity)

‘Organisational Quality’ as Research Dimension 3 (the last research dimension of the study) is analysed as the internal governance capacity of the Northern Cape Provincial Government to institutionalise and implement spatial planning as a statutory public policy function. In this framing, governance capacity is not treated as an abstract attribute, but as a set of observable organisational conditions, particularly financial resourcing and expenditure behaviour, human resource capacity and professional staffing and the performance management architecture through which spatial planning is prioritised, monitored and enforced across the administration. The findings suggest that organisational quality is a decisive constraint on planning implementation in that even where statutory planning instruments exist, weaknesses in organisational resourcing and accountability systems materially reduce the province’s ability to steer plan-led spatial governance.

A significant finding is that spatial planning is not sufficiently prioritised in the province’s internal resource allocation and expenditure patterns, and where resources are allocated, they are not consistently converted into implementation capacity. The study analyses multi-year budget and expenditure trends for the spatial planning function within the relevant provincial department(s), including a longitudinal view of final budget appropriations and actual spending. The overall picture reflects an organisational environment in which spatial planning competes unsuccessfully with other mandates and, critically, where under-expenditure weakens institutional credibility and the ability to justify greater allocations in subsequent cycles. This matters because spatial planning, particularly at provincial scale, requires stable operational capacity for interdepartmental alignment, coordination fora, spatial analysis support and plan monitoring.

Human resource capacity emerges as a second major constraint. The study analyses professional posts allocated to the spatial planning function over an extended period, as well as the extent to which these posts are filled. The findings indicate that the planning function is constrained not only by the formal structure shown on organisational charts (i.e., the approved posts and reporting lines), but by the practical reality that key posts remain vacant and too few suitably skilled staff are in place to sustain the function. As a result, the province lacks sufficient staffing depth, referring to an adequate spread of capacity across levels and roles, to consistently support coordination, plan implementation and ongoing governance requirements for spatial planning as a public function.

A third core finding concerns the performance management architecture through which spatial planning is made visible (or invisible) in organisational priorities. The study analyses the number and nature of performance indicators linked to spatial planning over time and compares the Northern Cape indicator profile with that of other provinces. The findings indicate that spatial planning performance is not consistently embedded in the organisational performance

system and, as a result, spatial planning is weakly institutionalised as a measurable function in the province. This matters because performance indicators operate as internal governance signals: they shape managerial attention, define what counts as organisational success, and anchor accountability processes. Where spatial planning lacks a stable set of indicators, it becomes difficult to enforce coordination requirements, measure alignment, or track implementation of the PSDF as a statutory instrument. The study therefore treats the limited performance indicator architecture as both a symptom and a driver of weak organisational quality. Without robust planning indicators, spatial planning cannot function as a continuous governance practice; it becomes episodic and vulnerable to shifts in political or administrative priorities.

Taken together, the budget and expenditure profile of the province, its professional staffing constraints and its limited performance management architecture, point to weak organisational quality. The province's organisational conditions do not consistently support the internal steering functions required to institutionalise spatial planning, particularly the PSDF's role in aligning sector plans, coordinating investment and affected actors in the spatial governance sector. The consequence is that spatial planning remains structurally present but operationally fragile in that governance capacity is insufficient to ensure that statutory instruments become central to routine planning and budgeting decisions. This organisational diagnosis strengthens the study's broader conclusion that the Northern Cape's planning challenge is not principally the absence of instruments, but the inability of the provincial administration to embed, resource and enforce spatial planning as a normalised governance function.

The findings across 'planning system quality,' 'plan quality' and 'organisational quality,' when combined, demonstrate a coherent pattern in that the 'rules of the game' for spatial planning derived from the regulatory framework of the province and the country and interpreted through governance and planning theory, are weakly enacted in practice. These patterns are a clear sign of unrealised spatial governance in the province.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusions

The empirical findings point to a fundamental contradiction in the Northern Cape's planning environment: while a statutory planning mandate and formal planning instruments exist, the province struggles to translate these into authoritative, routine governance practices. This contradiction is most evident in the disjuncture between (i) the formal existence of a planning system and (ii) the weak operational influence of that system on sector strategies, investment decisions, and organisational performance routines. This condition is described in the study as unrealised spatial governance: planning instruments exist 'on paper,' but are not sufficiently internalised as authoritative governance tools.

For the broader spatial governance discourse, the implications are twofold. First, strengthening spatial governance cannot be reduced to producing better plans or the introduction of evermore

non-statutory strategies and programmes aimed at improving inter-governmental relations. It rather requires improving the institutional conditions under which plans operate, particularly institutional authority, resourcing and performance systems. Secondly, sub-national planning reform must address the state's capacity to align and coordinate government departments, enforce statutory expectations and sustain integrative routines across political and administrative cycles.

The Northern Cape study represents a clear instance of unrealised spatial governance, where the failure to prioritise, spatial planning is driven less by the absence of statutory instruments than by weak institutionalisation seen in unresolved legal foundations, fragmented institutional authority, limited uptake of the primary spatial planning instruments PSDF and insufficient organisational capacity to embed plan-led spatial governance in routine decision-making.

5.2. Recommendations

The study recommends moving from compliance-driven planning to actively institutionalising spatial planning instruments and routines across provincial government. Key actions in this regard include:

- Finalise SPLUMA-aligned provincial legislation to restore legal certainty and enforceability.
- Clarify planning authority, competences and delegations to reduce overlap and improve accountability.
- Institutionalise the PSDF as the primary coordination instrument, requiring departmental alignment of strategies and budgets.
- Strengthen interdepartmental coordination and meaningful participation in PSDF processes as an accountability obligation.
- Align budgeting and expenditure to support plan implementation, coordination, and spatial monitoring.
- Stabilise professional staffing and embed spatial planning in performance indicators and management systems.

5.3. Contribution to the FIG Congress 2026 Theme

The study contributes directly to the FIG Congress 2026 theme, “The Future We Want – The SDGs and Beyond,” by demonstrating that sustainable development outcomes depend not only on formal planning frameworks but on whether spatial instruments are institutionalised as routine mechanisms linking land development decisions and public investment. This aligns with the NDP's emphasis on building an integrated spatial planning system across spheres of government and strengthening spatial data and analysis capabilities as a basis for implementation accountability. The Northern Cape case also underscores the urgency of such institutionalisation in climate-pressured contexts identified in national spatial policy, where innovation and coordinated governance responses are required to support resilience and equitable development trajectories.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Ms. Liezel Ahjum

Director: Spatial Planning and Land Use Management in the Northern Cape, with 26 years' experience in government spanning spatial planning, land use management and spatial information/GIS. Registered with the South African Geomatics Council (SAGC). She leads the provincial spatial planning and land use management function, including legislative implementation and interpretation, policy development, monitoring and evaluation, risk management, and people and performance management. Her work includes collaboration with provincial and municipal stakeholders on SDF/PSDF processes, IDP-related planning, land use management systems, and supporting municipal enterprise GIS capability, including SPLUMA

implementation support and the establishment of municipal planning tribunals. She has also held leadership roles in chess administration through Chess South Africa and Northern Cape Chess structures.

Prof Mark Oranje

Professor in the Department of Town & Regional Planning at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. His key areas of research and consulting are planning policy, planning history, strategic planning, regional development and the interface between mining and settlement development. Over the last twenty-two years, Mark has authored and co-authored numerous academic papers, articles, chapters in books and technical reports and acted as a consultant to a number of national and provincial departments, municipalities, NGOs, planning commissions, science councils and private companies on a wide range of issue related to his above areas of interest.

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