CONCEPTUALISING HARDSHIP AS CHARACTERISTIC OF LOCALITIES IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA. A SCOPING REVIEW

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BACKGROUND

Equitable health service delivery and workforce retention in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) depend on accurately identifying underserved areas, commonly termed hardship areas. Despite their policy relevance, no consensus definition exists across SSA countries, limiting cross-country comparisons and the application of geospatial methods for targeted intervention.

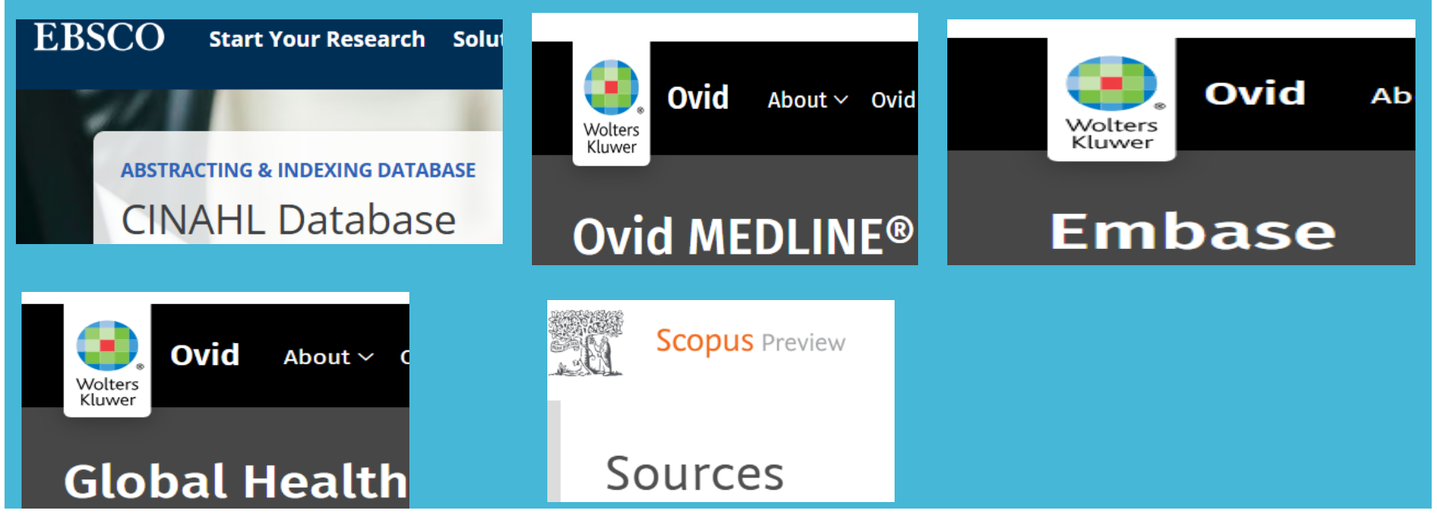
Objective: To delineate the definitions of hardship areas across countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and develop a unified typology.

METHODS

1.Framework

Arksey & O'Malley scoping-review methodology; reported per PRISMA-ScR

2. Search



3. Screening

Title/abstract and full-text screening done in Covidence by one reviewer; a second reviewer independently checked 20% of full texts (90% agreement).

4. Synthesis of findings

Deductive and inductive thematic coding of extracted definitions into features, sub-themes, and contextual themes.

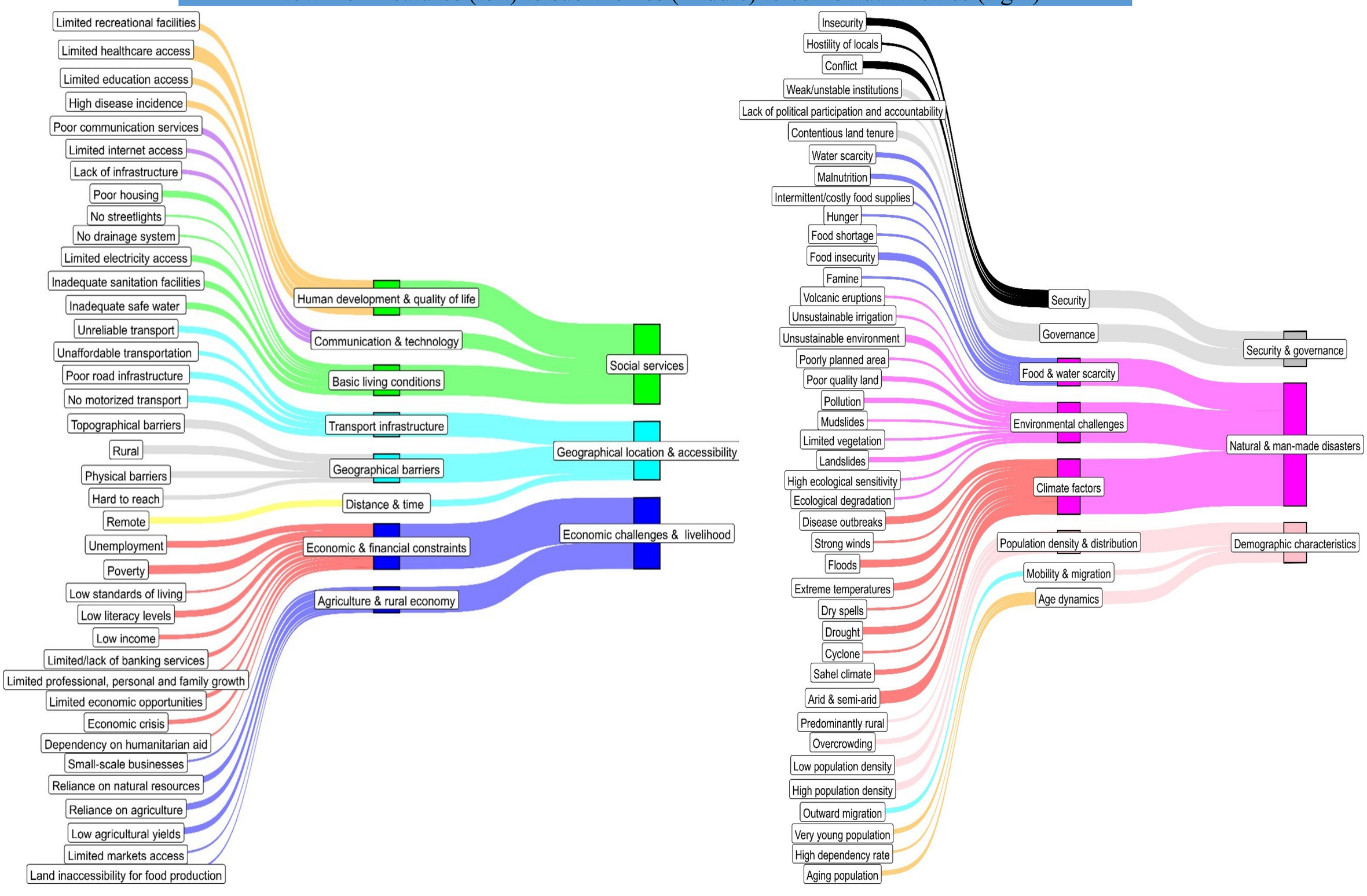
RESULTS

137 studies included, drawn from 15,017 records screened

79 distinct hardship features identified in the literature

6 contextual themes and 16sub-themes in the final typology

Flow from features (left) to sub-themes (middle) to contextual themes (right)



Key message

Hardship is not simply "far" or "poor". Remoteness and poverty were the most cited features, yet they are rarely unpacked: masking real differences between geographic isolation, institutional neglect, and economic deprivation. In several countries, the designation of hardship areas is shaped as much by political bargaining.

Conclusion & next steps

Hardship in Sub-Saharan Africa is a multidimensional, context-dependent concept, shaped by geography, services, economy, demography, disasters, and governance alike. By synthesising qualitative definitions into a unified typology, this review provides the conceptual groundwork for translating hardship into measurable, geospatial terms. This work underpins the ongoing development of a hardship index intended to make health workforce deployment decisions more transparent and equitable.

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