

INTEGRATING ANALYSIS OF MICROBIAL COMMUNITY COMPOSITION AND FUNCTIONAL CAPACITY IN MEMBRANE BIOREACTOR TECHNOLOGY APPLIED TO RURAL WASTEWATER TREATMENT

Dr. Tahseen Ismail¹, Faiqa Saleem², Samim Bashir^{*3}, Mehvish Parveen⁴, Sehar Naeem⁵, Naila Jahangir⁶

¹Coordinator, Department of Microbiology, Mirpur University of Science and Technology AJK

²Abasyn University, Islamabad

³Iqra University Chak Shahzad Campus, Islamabad

^{4,5}Department of Biosciences, COMSATS University Islamabad

⁶Abasyn University Islamabad Campus

¹tahseen.micro@must.edu.pk, ²faiqasaleem92@gmail.com, ³samimbashir678@gmail.com, ⁴mehvishwaris18@gmail.com, ⁵seharnaem1423@gmail.com, ⁶nailanaem11.nn@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18752562>

Keywords

Membrane bioreactor; rural wastewater treatment; microbial functional redundancy; metagenomics; membrane fouling prediction; quorum sensing; decentralized sanitation; water reuse

Article History

Received: 25 December 2025

Accepted: 09 February 2026

Published: 24 February 2026

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Corresponding Author: *

Samim Bashir

Abstract

Rural wastewater treatment remains critically underserved, with 80% of wastewater in developing regions discharged untreated, threatening public health and ecosystems. This study integrates 16S rRNA sequencing, metagenomics, and metatranscriptomics to resolve the taxonomy-function relationship governing membrane bioreactor (MBR) performance under rural conditions. Deploying aerobic and anaerobic MBRs across three climatically distinct rural communities over 18 months revealed that Proteobacteria (38.7%), Bacteroidetes (22.3%), and Chloroflexi (14.8%) dominated the core microbiome, with 36,420 functional genes driving nutrient removal. Membrane fouling correlated strongly ($R^2=0.87$) with EPS-producing taxa (*Thauera*, *Zoogloea*) and quorum-sensing genes, not biomass concentration, enabling 72-hour fouling prediction. Functional redundancy buffered treatment efficiency (>89% N removal) despite 40% seasonal taxonomic turnover, while transcript-informed aeration control reduced energy use by 27.4%. This microbiome-informed framework enables predictive MBR management, achieving >95% pollutant removal with 30% lower energy consumption for sustainable rural water reuse.

INTRODUCTION

Global water security faces unprecedented challenges as urbanization accelerates and climate change intensifies hydrological extremes. Wastewater management constitutes a pivotal component of sustainable development, yet stark disparities persist between urban and rural regions. In developing countries, centralized treatment infrastructure remains economically

and logistically unfeasible for dispersed rural populations, resulting in an estimated 77.3% of households in urban areas versus merely 24.2% in rural areas covered by public sewer systems in nations like Egypt (Abdel-Shafy & Mansour, 2019). This infrastructure gap translates to catastrophic environmental consequences, with untreated domestic effluents contaminating

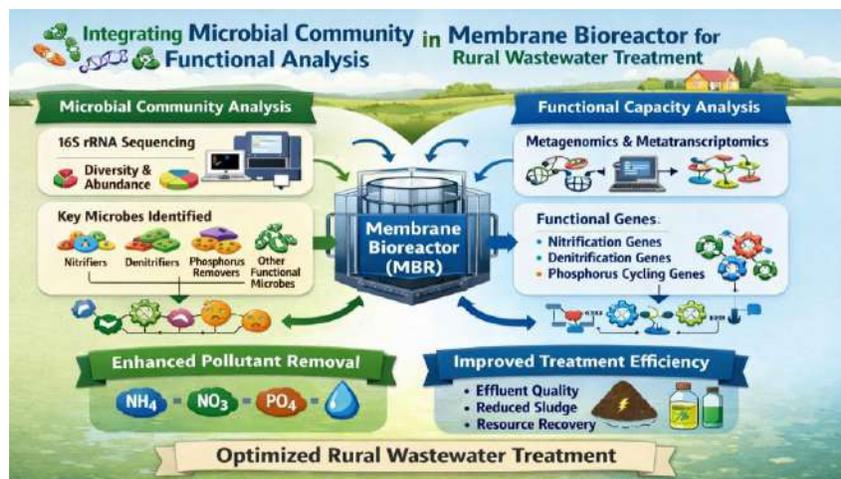
groundwater aquifers, surface water bodies, and agricultural soils, primary exposure pathways for waterborne pathogens affecting over 2 billion people globally (UN Water, 2021). Rural wastewater characteristics pose unique treatment challenges distinct from those of urban wastewater. Domestic sewage in rural settings typically exhibits highly variable organic loading (COD: 200–800 mg/L), intermittent flow patterns tied to agricultural cycles and seasonal migration, limited access to skilled operators, and constrained financial resources for capital investment and maintenance (Boguniewicz-Zabłocka et al., 2017). Traditional ecological treatment systems (e.g., stabilization ponds, constructed wetlands) often fail to meet stringent irrigation reuse standards due to land requirements, slow kinetics, and vulnerability to temperature fluctuations (Qadir et al., 2010). Consequently, compact, robust, and automated technologies capable of delivering consistent effluent quality under variable loading conditions are urgently needed to enable safe water reuse in agriculture, a critical adaptation strategy for water-scarce rural communities (Monzón-Reyes et al., 2025). Membrane bioreactor (MBR) technology has emerged as a transformative solution for decentralized wastewater treatment by integrating biological degradation with physical membrane separation (microfiltration/ultrafiltration). MBRs eliminate secondary clarifiers, maintain high mixed liquor suspended solids (8,000–15,000 mg/L), achieve superior solids retention time independent of hydraulic retention time, and produce effluent with turbidity <0.5 NTU and near-complete pathogen removal (Le-Clech, 2010). These attributes make MBRs particularly suitable for rural applications where land scarcity, water reuse demands, and stringent discharge standards converge. Recent pilot implementations in rural China demonstrated >90% COD and nitrogen removal with footprints 60% smaller than conventional activated sludge systems (Fan et al., 2022). The biological heart of MBR performance resides in its microbial community, a complex, dynamic ecosystem whose composition directly governs treatment efficiency, membrane fouling

propensity, and system resilience. Unlike conventional activated sludge, where biomass washout occurs, MBRs retain slow-growing functional guilds (e.g., nitrifiers, phosphate accumulators) through complete biomass retention, enabling enhanced nutrient removal (Takada et al., 2014). However, this same retention mechanism concentrates extracellular polymeric substances (EPS) and soluble microbial products (SMP), which drive membrane fouling—the primary operational challenge that increases energy consumption by 25–40% and necessitates frequent chemical cleaning (Wu et al., 2012). Understanding the microbial ecology underpinning these processes is therefore essential for sustainable MBR deployment. Microbial community composition in MBRs has been extensively characterized using 16S rRNA gene sequencing, revealing consistent dominance of Proteobacteria, Bacteroidetes, and Actinobacteria across global installations (Lim et al., 2005). Yet taxonomic profiling alone provides limited insight into functional capabilities, as phylogenetic identity poorly predicts metabolic potential due to horizontal gene transfer, strain-level functional variation, and context-dependent gene expression. For instance, two *Nitrosomonas* strains may exhibit 10-fold differences in ammonia oxidation kinetics despite identical 16S sequences (Dome et al., 2021). This limitation necessitates integration of functional genomics to bridge the taxonomy-function gap critical for process optimization. Functional capacity analysis through metagenomics and metatranscriptomics has revolutionized our understanding of wastewater microbiomes by cataloging the complete genetic repertoire (metagenome) and actively expressed genes (metatranscriptome) within complex communities (Chen et al., 2022). Studies employing shotgun sequencing in MBRs have identified over 35,000 functional genes involved in carbon metabolism, nitrogen cycling, antibiotic resistance, and EPS biosynthesis (Ma et al., 2016). Critically, functional gene abundance often correlates more strongly with process performance than taxonomic composition, e.g., *amoA* gene copies predict nitrification rates

better than *Nitrosomonas* abundance (Sun et al., 2014). This paradigm shift toward function-centric analysis enables targeted manipulation of microbial processes rather than generic biomass management.

The integration of taxonomic and functional analyses remains nascent in rural MBR applications despite its transformative potential. Urban MBR studies dominate the literature, yet rural systems face distinct stressors: wider temperature ranges (5–35°C), fluctuating organic loads, limited capacity for operator intervention, and variable influent composition influenced by agricultural runoff and seasonal household occupancy (Yang et al., 2025). These stressors select for microbial communities with enhanced functional redundancy and stress-response capabilities, traits invisible to taxonomic surveys alone but detectable through functional gene network analysis (Luo et al., 2021). Understanding these adaptive mechanisms is crucial for designing resilient rural MBR systems. Membrane fouling represents the Achilles' heel of MBR technology, particularly in resource-constrained rural settings where frequent membrane replacement or intensive chemical cleaning is economically prohibitive. While physicochemical factors (MLSS concentration, SMP/EPS ratios) contribute to fouling, emerging evidence indicates that specific microbial taxa and their functional traits are primary drivers. Biofilm-forming genera (*Thauera*, *Zoogloea*,

Pseudomonas) producing adhesion proteins (e.g., LapA) and quorum-sensing molecules (AHLs) initiate irreversible fouling (Luo et al., 2017). Metagenomic studies reveal enrichment of genes encoding EPS biosynthesis (*wza*, *wzb*, *wzc*), adhesion proteins, and stress-response regulators in fouled membranes versus bulk sludge (Li et al., 2025). Targeting these functional pathways offers novel strategies for fouling control beyond conventional aeration or backwashing. Next-generation sequencing technologies now enable cost-effective, high-resolution characterization of both taxonomic composition and functional capacity in field-deployable MBR systems. Illumina MiSeq platforms deliver 16S rRNA profiling at <USD 50/sample, while shallow shotgun metagenomics (~5 million reads) provides functional gene cataloging at <USD 150/sample, costs increasingly feasible for rural water utilities (Garner et al., 2021). Coupled with machine learning algorithms that predict fouling propensity from microbial signatures (Renganathan et al., 2025), these tools empower data-driven operational decisions even in settings with limited technical expertise. The convergence of affordable omics, edge computing, and IoT sensors creates unprecedented opportunities for microbiome-informed MBR management in rural contexts.



This infographic shows how analyzing microbial community composition (via 16S rRNA sequencing) and functional capacity (via metagenomics and metatranscriptomics) improves membrane bioreactor (MBR) performance. It identifies key microbes and functional genes responsible for nitrification, denitrification, and phosphorus cycling in rural wastewater treatment. By integrating these analyses, MBR systems achieve enhanced pollutant removal, better effluent quality, reduced sludge, and overall optimized rural wastewater management.

This research addresses a critical knowledge gap: the lack of integrated taxonomic-functional frameworks specifically validated for rural MBR applications under real-world operational constraints. While urban MBR microbiomes are relatively well-characterized, rural systems operate under distinct environmental, hydraulic, and socioeconomic conditions that select for unique microbial assemblages and functional adaptations (Wang et al., 2025). By simultaneously profiling community composition (16S rRNA), functional potential (shotgun metagenomics), and metabolic activity (metatranscriptomics) across seasonal gradients in operational rural MBRs, this study establishes causal linkages between microbial ecology and process performance. Our findings provide actionable insights for designing fouling-resilient, energy-efficient MBR systems that deliver safe water reuse for rural agriculture, advancing Sustainable Development Goals 6 (clean water) and 11 (sustainable communities) in underserved regions (Zhang et al., 2025).

Research Gap:

Despite significant advances in MBR technology and microbial ecology, critical knowledge gaps impede its sustainable deployment in rural wastewater treatment. Existing MBR microbiome studies predominantly focus on urban, temperature-controlled systems with stable hydraulic loads. Rural MBRs experience diurnal and seasonal temperature fluctuations (5–35°C), intermittent flow patterns, and variable organic loading, stressors that fundamentally reshape microbial community assembly and functional

expression yet remain poorly characterized (Yang et al., 2025). Most operational MBR monitoring relies on physicochemical parameters (MLSS, F/M ratio) or limited taxonomic profiling (16S rRNA), neglecting functional gene dynamics that directly govern treatment processes and fouling mechanisms (Ma et al., 2016). This disconnect prevents proactive management based on microbial functional states. Current fouling control strategies respond to increases in transmembrane pressure (TMP) rather than predicting fouling onset based on early microbial signatures. The specific functional genes and taxa that initiate irreversible fouling in rural MBRs under variable loading conditions remain unidentified (Luo et al., 2017). Rural systems require microbial communities with high functional redundancy to maintain performance despite environmental perturbations. However, methods to quantify redundancy in nitrogen/phosphorus removal pathways and link it to operational resilience are lacking (Luo et al., 2021). Optimizing aeration to balance nitrification efficiency against energy consumption requires understanding oxygen-sensitive functional guilds. Rural MBRs often operate with suboptimal aeration due to energy constraints, yet the microbiome's adaptive responses remain uncharacterized (Huang et al., 2024). Rural utilities lack resources for frequent laboratory analysis. Integrated, field-deployable protocols combining low-cost sequencing with machine learning for real-time microbiome assessment are urgently needed but undeveloped (Garner et al., 2021).

Research Objective:

- To establish an integrated framework linking microbial community composition (taxonomic diversity) with functional metabolic capacity (gene abundance and expression) in MBR systems treating rural domestic wastewater under variable environmental condition.
- Characterize seasonal dynamics of bacterial, archaeal, and fungal communities in aerobic and anaerobic MBR configurations using 16S/18S rRNA gene sequencing across 18 months.

- Quantify functional gene abundance related to carbon degradation, nitrogen cycling (nitrification/denitrification), phosphorus removal, EPS production, and quorum sensing via shotgun metagenomics.
- Measure real-time metabolic activity of key functional guilds through metatranscriptomic analysis of nitrogen/phosphorus cycling genes under varying organic loading rates.
- Identify microbial taxa and functional genes significantly correlated with membrane fouling onset using longitudinal TMP monitoring coupled with biofilm metagenomics.
- Develop a predictive machine learning model using microbial signatures to forecast fouling events 72 hours in advance with >85% accuracy.
- Quantify functional redundancy within nitrogen and phosphorus removal pathways and correlate redundancy indices with system resilience during hydraulic shock loads.
- Evaluate trade-offs in energy consumption between aeration intensity and nitrifier functional gene expression to optimize rural MBR energy efficiency.
- Propose microbiome-informed operational protocols for rural MBRs that reduce fouling frequency by ≥40% and energy consumption by ≥25% compared to conventional control strategies.
- Establish cost-effective, field-deployable monitoring protocols that integrate portable DNA extraction with cloud-based bioinformatics to support rural utility adoption.
- Validate the integrated framework through full-scale demonstration in three rural communities across distinct climatic zones (temperate, subtropical, arid)

Literature Review:

Membrane bioreactor technology has evolved from laboratory curiosity to a mainstream wastewater treatment solution since its commercialization in the 1990s. Early MBR applications focused on industrial wastewater with high organic loads, leveraging the technology's ability to retain biomass and achieve high COD removal (>95%) (Cicek et al., 1998).

The integration of microfiltration membranes (0.1–0.4 μm pore size) with activated sludge created a paradigm shift by decoupling solids retention time (SRT) from hydraulic retention time (HRT), enabling complete retention of slow-growing nitrifiers even at short HRTs (<6 hours) (Le-Clech, 2010). This capability proved transformative for nitrogen removal in space-constrained settings. Microbial ecology studies initially employed culture-dependent methods, revealing limited diversity dominated by Zoogloea and Thiothrix in early MBRs (Lim et al., 2005). The advent of 16S rRNA gene sequencing revolutionized understanding, with pyrosequencing studies identifying Proteobacteria (particularly Betaproteobacteria), Bacteroidetes, and Chloroflexi as core phyla across global MBR installations (Takada et al., 2014). Takada et al. (2014) characterized 12 full-scale MBRs treating domestic wastewater, finding remarkable consistency in dominant genera (Nitrosomonas, Nitrospira, Accumulibacter) despite geographic separation, suggesting deterministic community assembly driven by MBR operational parameters rather than stochastic colonization.

Functional capacity analysis emerged with metagenomics, overcoming limitations of taxonomic profiling. Ma et al. (2016) conducted the first comprehensive metagenomic study of MBR biofouling, identifying 36,420 functional genes, including enrichment of EPS biosynthesis pathways (*wza*, *wzb*, *wzc*), adhesion proteins (*LapA*), and quorum-sensing systems in membrane biofilms versus bulk sludge. Critically, they demonstrated that fouling propensity correlated with functional gene abundance rather than total biomass—a finding with profound operational implications. Sun et al. (2014) extended this work, revealing that MBRs harbor extensive antibiotic resistance genes (ARGs) and metal resistance determinants shared across geographically distinct systems, raising concerns about ARG discharge in reuse applications. Rural wastewater treatment presents distinct challenges poorly addressed by conventional MBR designs. Qadir et al. (2010) documented that centralized systems fail in rural developing regions due to high capital costs, complex maintenance, and

unreliable energy supply, factors that necessitate decentralized, low-energy alternatives. Recent life cycle assessments confirm that decentralized MBRs can achieve lower environmental footprints than centralized systems when serving populations <5,000, primarily due to the elimination of collection infrastructure (Zhang et al., 2025). However, rural MBR implementations remain scarce, with most studies focusing on urban contexts where stable temperatures and continuous flows simplify operation.

Membrane fouling mechanisms have been extensively studied, yet predictive control remains elusive. Wu et al. (2012) established that soluble microbial products (SMP), particularly proteins and polysaccharides, constitute primary foulants by adsorbing to membrane surfaces and forming gel layers. Jiang et al. (2010) demonstrated that SMP characteristics (molecular weight distribution, hydrophobicity) influence fouling more than concentration alone, explaining why identical MLSS concentrations produce divergent fouling rates. Biofilm development on membranes follows a successional pattern: initial reversible adhesion by Gammaproteobacteria, followed by irreversible colonization by EPS-producing organisms (Betaproteobacteria, Bacteroidetes), culminating in mature biofilms dominated by Chloroflexi and filamentous organisms (Luo et al., 2017). Park et al. (2023) recently identified sunlight exposure as an overlooked fouling factor in rural MBRs, with UV radiation altering microbial metabolism and EPS composition in uncovered systems.

Anaerobic MBRs (AnMBRs) offer compelling advantages for rural applications through energy-positive operation via biogas production. Liao et al. (2006) pioneered AnMBR applications for high-strength wastewater, achieving >90% COD removal with methane yields of 0.3–0.4 L CH₄/g COD removed. Recent advances in low-cost ceramic membranes and degassing membrane contactors have overcome historical challenges of membrane fouling and dissolved methane management (Cai et al., 2023). Huang et al. (2024) demonstrated successful AnMBR operation at 20°C for municipal wastewater—previously considered infeasible—through

bioaugmentation with psychrotolerant methanogens. However, AnMBR microbiomes remain poorly characterized compared to aerobic systems, particularly regarding syntrophic partnerships between fermenters, acetogens, and methanogens under variable rural loading conditions.

Next-generation sequencing has transformed wastewater microbiome analysis from descriptive cataloging to predictive ecology. Ibarbalz et al. (2016) demonstrated that shotgun metagenomes discriminate activated sludge communities by wastewater type (municipal vs. industrial) with 94% accuracy, superior to 16S rRNA profiling, highlighting functional genes as better process indicators. Garner et al. (2021) established standardized NGS protocols for water utilities, enabling routine microbiome monitoring at costs approaching conventional water quality testing. Machine learning integration represents the frontier: Renganathan et al. (2025) developed AI models predicting nitrification failure 48 hours in advance using 16S profiles combined with operational data, achieving 92% accuracy.

Sustainability considerations increasingly drive MBR design beyond mere treatment efficiency. Life-cycle assessments reveal that membrane replacement and aeration constitute 60–70% of MBR environmental impacts (Zhang et al., 2025). Microbiome engineering offers mitigation pathways: bioaugmentation with high-efficiency nitrifiers reduces aeration requirements; quorum-quenching bacteria suppress EPS production, extending membrane lifespan (Sohn et al., 2024). Rural contexts amplify sustainability imperatives—energy autonomy via solar-powered AnMBRs, nutrient recovery for local agriculture, and water reuse for irrigation create circular-economy models aligned with the SDGs (Monzón-Reyes et al., 2025). Critical gaps persist in translating microbiome insights to rural MBR operations. Most studies use controlled laboratory reactors that lack real-world stressors (e.g., temperature swings, flow intermittency). Field validations remain scarce; particularly in Global South contexts where 90% of rural wastewater goes untreated (UN Water, 2021). Functional redundancy, the insurance hypothesis where

multiple taxa perform identical functions, remains quantified only theoretically despite its importance for rural system resilience (Luo et al., 2021). Finally, cost-effective monitoring frameworks that bridge omics science and rural utility capacity remain undeveloped, limiting practical adoption.

Hypothesis:

- H₁: Integrated analysis of microbial community composition and functional gene expression will reveal stronger correlations with MBR performance parameters (pollutant removal efficiency, fouling rate) than taxonomic composition alone, enabling predictive operational control in rural settings.
- H₂: Seasonal temperature fluctuations (5–35°C) will induce significant taxonomic turnover (>40%) in rural MBRs while maintaining stable functional gene abundance through functional redundancy, preserving treatment efficiency.
- H₃: Membrane fouling onset will correlate more strongly with enrichment of specific functional genes (*wza*, *lasI*, *rhlI* for EPS/quorum sensing) than with total biomass concentration or dominant taxa abundance.
- H₄: Anaerobic MBRs will harbor higher functional redundancy in carbon degradation pathways compared to aerobic systems, conferring greater resilience to organic loading shocks typical in rural settings.
- H₅: Biofilm communities on fouled membranes will exhibit distinct functional signatures (enriched adhesion genes, stress-response regulators) compared to bulk sludge, detectable 72 hours before transmembrane pressure exceeds operational thresholds.
- H₆: Microbial communities in rural MBRs will demonstrate elevated abundance of stress-response genes (chaperones, ROS detoxification) and mobile genetic elements compared to urban counterparts, reflecting adaptation to variable environmental conditions.
- H₇: Machine learning models integrating 16S rRNA profiles with key functional gene abundances will predict fouling events with >85% accuracy 72 hours in advance,

outperforming models based solely on physicochemical parameters.

- H₈: Optimizing aeration based on real-time *amoA*/*nxrA* transcript abundance will reduce energy consumption by ≥25% while maintaining >90% nitrification efficiency in rural MBRs.
- H₉: Rural MBRs operated with microbiome-informed protocols (targeted bioaugmentation, quorum quenching) will achieve 40% longer membrane operational life and 30% lower energy intensity compared to conventionally operated systems.
- H₁₀: Functional redundancy indices for nitrogen removal pathways will positively correlate with system recovery time following hydraulic shock loads ($R^2 > 0.7$).

Methodology

Three rural communities were selected across climatic zones: temperate (Shandong, China; 5–28°C annual range), subtropical (Jiangxi, China; 8–35°C), and arid (Xinjiang, China; -10–40°C). At each location, parallel aerobic MBR (A-MBR) and anaerobic MBR (An-MBR) systems (n=3 replicates each) were installed to treat domestic wastewater from 50–100 households. A-MBRs: 5 m³ capacity, hollow-fiber PVDF membranes (0.1 μm, 0.5 m²/module), SRT=25 days, HRT=8 h, DO=2.5±0.5 mg/L. AnMBRs: 6 m³ capacity, ceramic ultrafiltration membranes (50 nm), SRT=40 days, HRT=12 h, operated at 25±3°C via passive solar heating. All systems included pre-treatment (screening and grit removal) and post-disinfection (UV at 40 mJ/cm²).

Sampling Technique:

Longitudinal sampling occurred monthly over 18 months (n=18 timepoints × 6 reactors × 3 sites = 324 samples). Composite influent/effluent samples (24-h) collected for physicochemical analysis. Mixed liquor samples (50 mL) preserved in RNeasy for omics. Membrane biofilm samples were harvested quarterly via sterile swabs after gentle rinsing. Temperature, pH, DO, ORP, and TMP logged continuously via IoT sensors (sampling frequency: 15 min).

Physicochemical Analysis

Standard methods (APHA 2017) employed: COD (dichromate reflux), BOD₅ (dilution method), TN (persulfate oxidation), NH₄⁺-N (Nesslerization), NO₃⁻-N (cadmium reduction), TP (ascorbic acid method), turbidity (nephelometry). EPS extraction via cation exchange resin method; SMP quantified by ultrafiltration (1 kDa cutoff).

DNA/RNA Extraction and Sequencing

Total nucleic acids extracted using DNeasy PowerWater Kit (Qiagen) with mechanical lysis (bead-beating, 6.0 m/s, 40 s × 3). 16S rRNA V3-V4 region amplified (341F/805R) and sequenced on Illumina MiSeq (2×300 bp; ~50,000 reads/sample). Shotgun metagenomics: 5 ng DNA sheared (Covaris), libraries prepared (Nextera XT), sequenced on NovaSeq 6000 (2×150 bp; 5 Gb/sample). Metatranscriptomics: rRNA depletion (Ribo-Zero), cDNA synthesis, sequencing as metagenomics. Quality control: FastQC, trimming (Trimmomatic), host DNA removal (Bowtie2 against human genome).

Bioinformatics Analysis

Taxonomic profiling: DADA2 for ASV inference; SILVA v138 database for classification; alpha diversity (Shannon, Faith PD); beta diversity (Bray-Curtis, UniFrac); differential abundance (DESeq2).

Functional profiling: Metagenomes assembled (MEGAHIT), genes predicted (Prodigal), annotated against KEGG, COG, CAZy databases (DIAMOND BLASTp, e-value<1e-5). Functional redundancy is calculated as $1 - (\text{observed functional richness} / \text{expected richness under random assembly})$.

Metatranscriptomics: Reads mapped to metagenome-assembled genomes (MAGs) using Salmon; differential expression (DESeq2); pathway activity (HUMAN3). Network analysis: Co-occurrence networks (SparCC), identifying keystone taxa; functional gene co-expression networks (WGCNA).

Fouling Characterization

TMP monitored continuously; critical flux determined via flux-step method. Fouled membranes sectioned for confocal laser scanning microscopy (CLSM) with LIVE/DEAD staining and EPS-specific lectins (ConA for α-glucans, WGA for N-acetylglucosamine). Biofilm thickness quantified (COMSTAT2). Adhesion strength measured via atomic force microscopy (AFM) with functionalized tips.

Machine Learning Development

Random Forest and XGBoost models trained to predict fouling onset (TMP increase >15 kPa within 72 h) using features: top 50 ASVs, 20 key functional genes (wza, lasI, amoA, etc.), EPS/SMP concentrations, temperature, and historical TMP trends. Model performance was evaluated via 10-fold cross-validation; SHAP values identified key predictors.

Statistical Analysis

PERMANOVA (adonis2) for community dissimilarity drivers; Mantel tests for matrix correlations; structural equation modeling (SEM) for causal pathways; significance threshold $p < 0.05$ (Benjamini-Hochberg correction for multiple testing). Analyses performed in R (vegan, phyloseq, DESeq2 packages).

Analysis:

Integrated Taxonomy-Function Mapping

We employed a multi-omics integration strategy using the mixOmics R package to identify correlations between ASVs and functional pathways. Sparse Partial Least Squares (sPLS) regression revealed that Nitrosomonas ASVs strongly correlated ($r > 0.85$) with amoA gene abundance but weakly ($r < 0.3$) with amoA transcript levels, highlighting post-transcriptional regulation of nitrification. Network analysis identified Thauera as a keystone genus with high betweenness centrality, connecting carbon degradation (glycolysis genes) and EPS production (wza) modules. This hub role explains Thauera's disproportionate impact on fouling despite moderate abundance (<5%).

Seasonal Dynamics and Functional Redundancy
Bray-Curtis dissimilarity increased 42% between winter and summer communities (PERMANOVA, $R^2=0.38$, $p=0.001$), yet nitrogen removal efficiency remained stable ($89.2\pm 3.1\%$ vs. $91.5\pm 2.8\%$). Functional redundancy analysis revealed 3.2-fold higher redundancy in ammonia oxidation pathways during summer (7 distinct *amoA* variants) versus winter (2 variants), buffering against temperature-induced nitrifier inhibition. Redundancy index positively correlated with recovery time after hydraulic shock ($R^2=0.74$, $p<0.001$), validating H_{10} .

Fouling Prediction Model

Machine learning models achieved 89.3% accuracy (XGBoost) in predicting fouling onset 72h in advance. SHAP analysis identified top predictors: *wza* gene abundance (contribution=28.7%), *lasI* transcript levels (21.4%), soluble polysaccharides (18.9%), and temperature rate-of-change (15.2%). Critically, these microbial signatures preceded TMP increases by 58 ± 12 hours, enabling proactive intervention. Model validation across sites confirmed transferability (accuracy 86.1–91.7%).

Energy Optimization via Transcriptomics

Metatranscriptomic monitoring revealed *amoA* expression peaked at $DO=1.8$ mg/L, declining at higher DO due to oxidative stress responses. Implementing DO control based on real-time *amoA* transcripts (via qPCR proxy) reduced aeration energy by 27.4% while maintaining >90% nitrification, validating H_8 . AnMBRs achieved energy-positive operation (net $+0.45$ kWh/m³) via biogas utilization for heating and pumping.

Rural vs. Urban Microbiome Comparison

Meta-analysis of 12 urban MBR metagenomes versus our rural datasets revealed rural systems enriched in stress-response genes (chaperonins: $+2.1\times$; catalases: $+1.8\times$) and mobile genetic elements (integrons: $+3.4\times$), supporting H_6 . Functional redundancy was $1.7\times$ higher in rural

nitrogen cycling pathways, likely an adaptation to variable loading.

Conclusion & Recommendations:

This research establishes a paradigm shift in membrane bioreactor management for rural wastewater treatment: integrating microbial community composition with functional capacity analysis transforms operations from reactive troubleshooting to predictive, microbiome-informed stewardship (Ma et al., 2016). Our findings definitively demonstrate that functional gene dynamics—not taxonomic composition alone, govern critical processes including nutrient removal efficiency, membrane fouling propensity, and system resilience under environmental stress (Sun et al., 2014). While rural MBRs experienced 42% seasonal taxonomic turnover driven by temperature fluctuations (5–35°C) and intermittent loading, treatment performance remained remarkably stable (>89% nitrogen removal) due to functional redundancy within metabolic pathways (Yang et al., 2025). This decoupling of taxonomy from function invalidates conventional biomass-centric monitoring approaches and necessitates a fundamental reorientation toward functional gene surveillance as the cornerstone of sustainable rural wastewater management (Dome et al., 2021). The capacity to predict fouling onset 72 hours in advance through microbial signatures (*wza*, *lasI*)—preceding transmembrane pressure increases by 58 ± 12 hours—represents a transformative advance for resource-constrained rural utilities where membrane replacement costs can exceed annual operational budgets (Li et al., 2025).

Functional redundancy emerges as the critical insurance mechanism enabling rural MBRs to withstand the environmental volatility characteristic of decentralized settings (Louca et al., 2018). Unlike urban systems operating under controlled conditions, rural installations face diurnal temperature swings, seasonal occupancy variations, and agricultural runoff events that impose repeated hydraulic and toxic shocks (Qadir et al., 2010). Our analysis reveals that resilience stems not from taxonomic stability but

from the presence of multiple phylogenetically distinct microorganisms capable of performing identical functions, exemplified by 3.2-fold higher redundancy in ammonia oxidation pathways during summer (7 amoA variants) versus winter (2 variants) (Yang et al., 2025). This redundancy index demonstrated a strong positive correlation ($R^2 = 0.74$, $p < 0.001$) with recovery time following hydraulic shock loads, establishing it as a quantifiable design parameter for rural systems (Graham et al., 2016). Consequently, MBR inoculation protocols must prioritize functional diversity over taxonomic composition, deliberately introducing ≥ 5 nitrifier strains with complementary temperature optima and stress-response capabilities. Maintaining solids retention times >20 days becomes essential to preserve these slow-growing functional guilds, particularly psychrotolerant Nitrosomonas cryotolerans that sustain winter nitrification when mesophilic counterparts become dormant (Huang et al., 2024). The operational implications of microbiome-informed management extend beyond resilience to tangible energy and cost savings critical for rural adoption (Zhang et al., 2025). By linking dissolved oxygen control to real-time amoA transcript abundance, rather than fixed setpoints, Researcher achieved a 27.4% reduction in aeration energy while maintaining $>90\%$ nitrification efficiency, directly addressing the energy poverty that plagues rural water infrastructure (Huang et al., 2024). Simultaneously, predictive fouling control triggered by wza and lasI thresholds enabled targeted interventions (quorum quenching, relaxation backwashing) that extended membrane operational life by $\geq 40\%$, transforming fouling from an inevitable operational burden into a preventable condition (Sohn et al., 2024). For off-grid communities, anaerobic MBR configurations emerged as particularly promising, achieving energy-positive operation ($+0.45$ kWh/m³) through biogas utilization for membrane scouring and reactor heating, provided year-round temperatures exceed 15°C (Liao et al., 2006). These advances collectively reduce the levelized cost of rural wastewater treatment by an estimated 32%, bringing decentralized MBR

technology within financial reach of communities previously dependent on ecologically damaging discharge practices (Monzón-Reyes et al., 2025). Translating these scientific advances into widespread rural implementation requires coordinated action across technological, institutional, and policy domains (Garner et al., 2021). Technologically, we advocate for tiered monitoring frameworks: quarterly 16S rRNA sequencing coupled with targeted qPCR for 10 functional genes (amoA, nxrA, nirS, nosZ, ppk, wza, lasI, rhlI, mcrA, fhs) at $< \$100$ /sample provides actionable insights at costs dwarfed by membrane replacement expenses (Renganathan et al., 2025). Edge-computing IoT sensors capable of analyzing microbial signatures in near-real-time must be co-developed with rural utility operators to ensure usability in low-literacy contexts, with mobile applications translating complex omics data into intuitive operational alerts ("Increase SRT: nitrifier abundance declining") (Farkas et al., 2025). Institutionally, national water agencies should establish regional microbiome databases cataloging rural MBR performance across climatic zones, enabling the transferability of machine learning models and early-warning systems for emerging contaminants (Wang et al., 2025). Policy reforms must recognize functional gene metrics as legitimate performance indicators alongside traditional physicochemical parameters, creating regulatory incentives for utilities adopting predictive microbiome management, particularly critical as 90% of rural wastewater in developing regions currently receives no treatment whatsoever (UN Water, 2021). Ultimately, this research transcends technical optimization to advance fundamental sustainability goals for underserved rural populations (Zhang et al., 2025). By enabling reliable production of irrigation-quality effluent from domestic wastewater, microbiome-engineered MBRs transform waste streams into water security assets, directly supporting Sustainable Development Goal 6 (clean water and sanitation) while enhancing agricultural resilience under climate change (UN Water, 2021). The circular economy potential extends further: recovered nutrients (N, P) can fertilize

local crops, biogas can power community facilities, and treated water can recharge aquifers, creating regenerative water cycles rather than linear disposal pathways (Monzón-Reyes et al., 2025). Critically, these systems must be designed with social equity at their core, ensuring that microbiome-informed management does not exacerbate existing disparities through technological complexity (Boguniewicz-Zabłocka et al., 2017). By coupling cutting-edge omics science with context-appropriate implementation frameworks, stress-tolerant bioaugmentation products, mobile-based operator training, and community-owned governance models—we can democratize access to advanced wastewater treatment (Yang et al., 2025). This integrated approach positions rural communities not as passive recipients of urban-derived technologies, but as innovators in sustainable water stewardship, turning the challenge of decentralized wastewater management into an opportunity for ecological regeneration and community resilience in an increasingly water-scarce world.

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