



EMPOWERING TOMORROW'S LEADERS THROUGH YOUTH EMPOWERMENT INITIATIVES AND EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS AT A RURAL MUNICIPALITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Persistent inequality and poverty remain deeply entrenched in South Africa, highlighting the shortcomings of the post-1994 developmental agenda. Socio-economic challenges such as unemployment, inadequate housing, corruption, limited access to basic services, and a stagnant economy continue to hinder progress. Youth unemployment, particularly at the local government level, is a critical policy concern, as seen in Mhlontlo Local Municipality. This study examines youth empowerment programs and job creation initiatives in the municipality, assessing their alignment with the National Youth Policy and their effectiveness in ensuring sustainable employment. Using a qualitative research approach within an interpretivist paradigm, the study employed semi-structured interviews to gather insights. Findings reveal that Mhlontlo Local Municipality lacks a dedicated youth development policy, while the flawed theory of change in the National Youth Policy undermines implementation. Moreover, discrepancies between policy rhetoric and actual execution, weak political support, and poor stakeholder engagement further impede youth development efforts. The study highlights the need for transparent governance, strategic policy revisions, and enhanced communication to improve program effectiveness. By addressing these gaps, the research contributes to the discourse on youth development and offers policy recommendations for encouraging and improving meaningful employment opportunities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Youth unemployment is currently a serious challenge in the country. Youth in South Africa are increasingly being excluded from the economic mainstream due to low levels of education, negative attitudes, poor participation in decision-making, youth marginalization, undefined youth legislation regarding youth participation, improper communication channels, low levels of education that trigger rural to urban migration for greener pastures (Nicols, 2011; Mtwesi, 2014). Another factor for the exclusion of youth from the mainstream economy is the lack of technological know-how which is a necessity for driving the economy in the digital age (Mtwesi, 2014). Further, the economic participation of the youth is being hindered by escalating unemployment which has caused greater marginalization of the youth.

The South African government has introduced many youth empowerment programs to support youth development and to reduce youth unemployment and poverty in communities (NYDA, 2016). Youth empowerment programmes are targeted at youth who range from 14 to 35 years; which are considered the most economically active group (Economic Focus, 2014); and respond to the challenge of the young population facing the risk of growing unemployment due to rising population and socio-economic inequalities (Asamaoh, 2014). In the opinion of Severino (2014), Africa's young population is composed of a huge potential workforce which can trigger economic development and prosperity (Ashford, 2015:1). The government attempts to redress youth inequalities through youth employment programmes which are meant to emancipate the youth. These programmes include entrepreneurship and skills development programmes such as cooperatives, agriculture, crafting and manufacturing skills programmes. Many youth empowerment programmes fail due to socio-economic inequalities (National Youth Development Agency, 2011), poor participation by youth, lack of formal education or unemployment and poverty, crime and drug abuse, xenophobia and limited educational opportunities especially among rural youth (Nicolson, 2013). This study, therefore, analyses

whether youth empowerment programmes in Mhlontlo Local Municipality contributed to job creation opportunities.

The World Bank (2012) states that youth unemployment is a serious global concern which has serious effects on the economic well-being of youth in third-world countries. In 57 low-income countries, the World Bank offered youth development programs to ensure employment creation for the many jobless youths. The International Labour Organization (ILO) (2011) states that close to 12.6% (per cent) of youth in the global workforce were rendered jobless. The unemployment rate of the youth varies considerably in low and middle-income countries depending on gender, education level, religion, and ethnicity. This study intends to assess whether government youth programmes in Mhlontlo Local Municipality contributed to youth socio-economic development and job creation opportunities.

2. PROBLEM ORIENTATION

The Mhlontlo Local Municipality IDP Final Review 2021-2022, indicated that youth unemployment is very high owing to limited economic opportunities. Socio-economic inequalities are a common sight in the municipality inherited by the former apartheid regime although this may not be the only cause of poverty in the municipality. There is limited investor confidence due to the 'ruralness' or geographical location. In response to high levels of poverty, the government began rendering youth empowerment projects in Mhlontlo as part of spearheading developmental local government. However, these youth empowerment programmes are not sustainable due to implementation challenges that include poor monitoring and evaluation of programmes, corruption, mismanagement of funds, lack of accountability, poor funding model, and lack of tenacity among youth which makes the government fail to realize the returns of these initiatives. Further, Madumo (2018) discovered that many municipalities in South Africa do not encourage youth participation which hinders employment creation.

The youth programmes also fail due to design challenges: there is poor coordination of traditional, political and economic partnerships; and poor local governance to improve youth participation (Brynard and Musitha 2011). Governance challenges at the municipal level are worsened by a lack of accountability and transparency among local leaders, which hinders the achievement of policy objectives and deepens socio-economic disparities (Rulashe

& Ijeoma, 2022). This study, therefore, assesses whether youth programmes in Mhlontlo Local Municipality contributed to job creation opportunities.

3. THEORETICAL & CONCEPTUAL DISPOSITION

A South African Overview

Youth empowerment initiatives in South Africa are crucial for addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by the country's young population. High youth unemployment rates, estimated at around 45.5% in the first quarter of 2024, and barriers to education and healthcare access underscore the urgent need for effective empowerment strategies (Statistics South Africa, 2024). These initiatives are vital for promoting economic growth, and social cohesion, and reducing inequality. Programs like the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) have gained prominence for their efforts to provide entrepreneurship training, career guidance, and financial support to young entrepreneurs. However, despite its successes, the NYDA has faced criticism for not sufficiently addressing the needs of marginalized youth, particularly in rural areas, where resources and opportunities are often scarce (NYDA Annual Report, 2020).

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a vital role in youth empowerment in South Africa. Initiatives like Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator and the Youth Employment Service (YES) bridge the gap between education and employment. Harambee has connected over 100,000 young people to jobs through sector partnerships and training, while YES incentivizes businesses to hire first-time job seekers. These NGOs effectively support underserved communities by tailoring programs to local needs.

Despite their impact, long-term sustainability remains a challenge due to funding constraints and infrastructure gaps. Research highlights that many programs achieve short-term success but struggle with scalability (Rena & Daile, 2021). A collaborative approach involving government, the private sector, and civil society is essential for a comprehensive and inclusive youth empowerment framework. A paradigm shift is needed at the local government level to ensure organisational change and stakeholder involvement (Miggels & Rulashe, 2022). This holistic approach can help ensure that initiatives are not only effective in the short term but also sustainable and scalable to benefit future generations.

Barriers to youth empowerment

Several challenges confront youth empowerment and job creation in South Africa. These have been discussed in detail in the following sections.

Inherited systemic challenges

The systemic socio-economic injustices due to apartheid still plague contemporary youth attitudes and participation in the mainstream economy. Youth have negative attitudes and mistrust of government programmes, their participation in youth programs and decision-making processes are small. This calls for various state departments to collectively work together to harness the potential of youth by creating an enabling environment that 10 promotes youth cohesion and economic networking for youth development (Van de Byl, 2015:33)

Inherited systemic challenges

The Red tape is one of the main obstacles to proactive youth active participation in the economic sector. Empowering youth becomes a challenge as many procedures must be followed to get projects or funds approved. Red tape hinders entrepreneurship, as people are frustrated by delays in approvals of loans, lots of paperwork and long waits for licensing of business. It stems from poor government management mechanisms that prevent small business and entrepreneurial projects from being developed. Active citizenship comes with economic power and so these structural failures work against the growth and empowerment of young people (DTI, 2005). In Kenya, the government recognized youth issues and made various attempts in 2005 to resolve them through the Ministry of State and Youth. This was strengthened by the 2006 Kenya National Youth Policy as well as the Strategic Plan (2007-12). These policy standpoints were meant to increase youth awareness of the existence of government departments which could provide help in education, policymaking and setting up of business ventures.

Limited funding for youth empowerment projects

Although literature evidence shows that South Africa recognized the mandate to support youth development projects and boost the economy and job creation, however, underfunding remains a challenge. Youth find it hard to obtain funding from the government hence active participation in economic matters remains low.

Corruption that adversely affects youth empowerment and job creation

Corruption has negative consequences on the economic lives of the youth in South Africa. Public resources are abused and embezzled through corruption tendencies. The government procurement systems and processes are manipulated by corrupt officials. The youth development projects often suffer as corrupt local government officials often divert or steal the funds for personal gain hindering youth economic participation. In 2016 Corruption Watch ranked South Africa 64th out of the 176 countries whereas the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index ranked it 69th out of 176 countries in terms of corruption. These statistics indicate that corruption is still rife and has penetrated the three-sphere of government thereby affecting youth development as projects lack the necessary human and financial resources.

Poor Intra-governmental coordination

Poor coordination amongst the different government organs acts as a barrier to the successful delivery of youth programme outputs and outcomes. Research studies have shown that youth empowerment in the Eastern Cape Province is being constrained by poor intra-governmental coordination (Satgar, 2007:19).

Poor governance negatively impacts youth empowerment and job creation programmes

Various local municipalities are grappling with weak accountability structures that are marred by corruption and maladministration. There is inadequate participatory governance in local government, making it difficult for youth to actively participate in the municipality. The lack of participation by youth and the local community in the municipal structures culminates in community protests for better service delivery. The youth who are supposed to be at the forefront of demanding good governance often lack the expertise nor knowledge on how government can be held to account (Booyesen, 2011).

Technological skill deficit affects youth participation in programmes

Youth have inadequate technological knowledge and skills in rural communities. The skills gap in information communication technology amongst youth is mainly due to few or no vocational schools in rural communities. In South Africa, youth entrepreneurship in information and science has marginally declined (Booyesen, 2011). The Government in partnership with key stakeholders

need to introduce information communication technology skills empowerment programmes targeting youth in rural communities.

Lack of youth participation in science and technology

Poor or negative perceptions about technology emanate from various problems such as poverty, unemployment, and general socio-economic inequalities (Langley, 2016). In several countries as Resnick and Casale (2011) observed, youth participation in science and technology issues is fast decreasing or if not developing fast. This emanates from a lack of interest in science and technology which often manifests itself in schools where curricular choices are made. There has been a significant decrease in the number of students undertaking science subjects which reduced youth efficiency in almost every economic sector of the country (Nicholson, 2013). A similar trend has been evident and consolidated in admissions to tertiary education where students shun study fields such as engineering and technology studies. Such a negative response by the youth presents numerous challenges to youth development as information science remains largely untapped thereby rendering the field somehow inefficient (Reddy, Bhorat, Powell, Visser & Arends, 2016).

Apart from students enrolling for information science in some developing countries young students even ignore to enrol for mathematics and physics opting for humanities and other management studies. Based on the ongoing discussion, therefore, youth are marginally decreasing their efficiency which poses a challenge to governments including South Africa to devise other strategies on how to increase youth economic empowerment and advance the field of information science.

Unemployment

In summarizing the following key issues from the literature review that examined several barriers to youth empowerment included - poor intra-governmental coordination, inherited legacy of the apartheid, complex government bureaucratic processes, limited funding on youth empowerment projects, corruption, poor Intra-governmental coordination in youth development projects, poor compliance to governance principles such as transparency and accountability, skills deficit, lack of scientific and technological knowledge and skills, and unemployment. In sum, the general challenges that confront youth empowerment and job creation in South Africa are inter alia. The former apartheid regime's systemic socio-economic injustices still plague contemporary young

people; red tape is one of the main obstacles to proactive youth active participation in the economic sector; limited funding on youth empowerment projects; corruption that adversely affects youth empowerment and job creation; poor intra-governmental coordination in youth development projects; poor governance that negatively impacts on youth empowerment and job creation programmes; technological skill deficit affects youth participation in programmes; lack of youth participation in science and technology; and unemployment.

Recent research evidence on youth empowerment and job creation programmes

This section will highlight findings from selected recent research evidence on youth empowerment and job creation. The key findings by Javeed (et al., 2022) in their study on factors that impact youth empowerment and job creation in Pakistan, indicated that government policies, lack of political participation, employment opportunities, and social engagement had an impact on youth empowerment and their ability to initiate entrepreneurial activities.

Vale (et al., 2022) in their study "Boosting employment for decent employment for African Youth" showed that youth will navigate between formal and informal sectors in the future context of work; the study showed the need for more research and government interventions to focus on creating sustainable livelihoods for young people that include youth participation and careful targeting most affected youth. The key findings based on research evidence synthesis mapping of interventions to increase youth employment globally (Apunyo et al. 2022) indicated that most evidence was in the category of 'training', while categories that had the least evidence were - information services; and decent. This research responds to the need for geographically locating the study in the context of low-income rural population; and need for qualitative methods to systematic investigation to produce reliable and credible findings based on evidence.

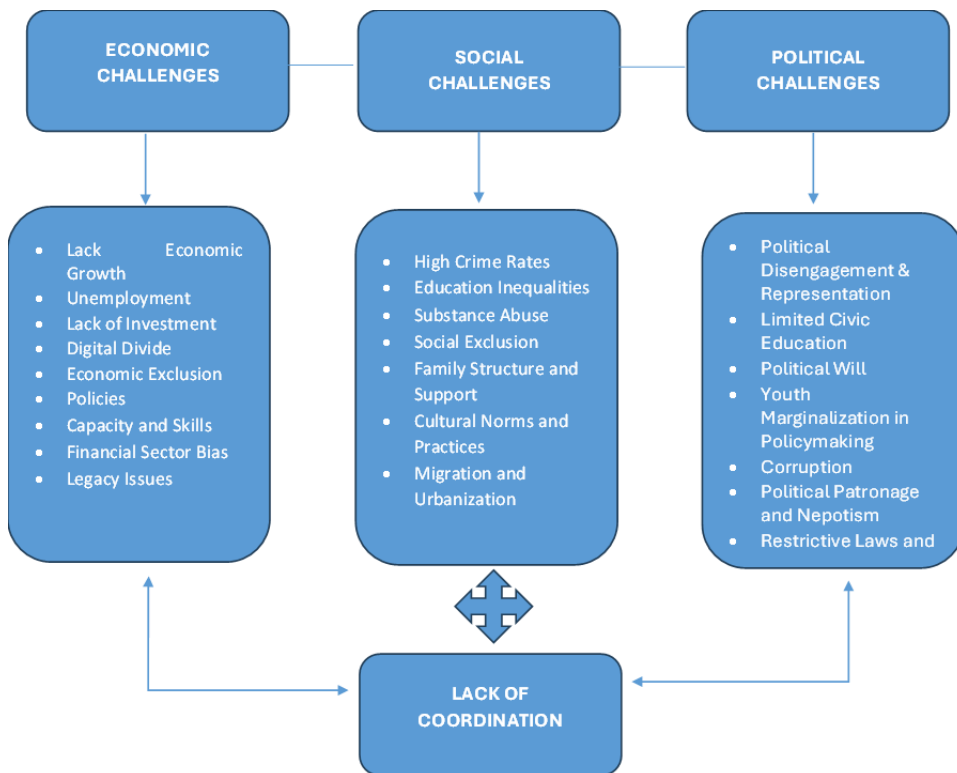


Figure 1. Challenges to Youth Empowerment as adapted from- Dire (2020)

Table 1. South African Legislative and Policy Frameworks for Youth Empowerment

Legislation	Articulation
<i>Constitution of South Africa of 1996</i>	The Constitution of South Africa, in its 1996 Bill of Rights, ensures that youth have the democratic right to freely express themselves and participate in elections from the age of eighteen. Youth involvement can extend to various economic sectors where their input is vital. Section 9(3) of the Bill of Rights prohibits discrimination based on race, gender, or age, promoting equality. Consequently, youth participation in politics and decision-making is essential for enhancing their economic development.
<i>National Development Plan 2030</i>	Chapter 6 of the NDP 2030 outlines plans for an integrated and inclusive rural economy aimed at stimulating job creation by 2030. It calls for youth to take ownership in adopting local entrepreneurial opportunities and creating their own jobs. Additionally, the NDP encourages youth to participate actively in government structures to ensure government accountability. Active citizenry involves holding the government accountable and contributing to policymaking across all three spheres of government.
<i>National Youth Development Agency (NYDA)</i>	The 1994 democratic dispensation established the NYDA framework to empower youth in South Africa. The National Youth Commission Act of 1996 created the National Youth Commission to promote racial reconciliation and improve the lives of youth, addressing poverty and inequalities.
<i>Skills Development Act of 1998</i>	This framework guides local municipalities in South Africa to enhance employee skills through training, in collaboration with the National Skills Authority Fund, SETAs, and labour centres. These agencies promote public-private partnerships to boost the economy. Municipalities are given a legal framework and mechanisms to partner with SETAs, empowering young people with skills to improve employability and their lives.
<i>Employment Equity Act, 55 of 1998</i>	The Employment Equity Act of 1998 mandates that government recruitment based on equity principles includes skills training and development to enhance competence. This policy requires effective human resource departments to drive socio-economic transformation. Affirmative action aims to empower historically marginalized groups, including blacks, Indians, Coloureds, women, and people with disabilities, ensuring their recruitment is paired with adequate training and development.

Table 1 (cont).

<p><i>Youth Enterprise Development Strategy (YEDS) 2013-2023</i></p>	<p>The National Youth Enterprise Development Strategy aims to engage youth in the economy, specifically targeting previously disadvantaged groups. It focuses on developing entrepreneurial skills, providing financial resources, and offering mentorship and support. The strategy seeks to reduce economic disparities and promote inclusive growth by enhancing education, training, and market access for young people.</p>
<p><i>The National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS)</i></p>	<p>The National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS) facilitates municipal collaboration with SETAs, providing a legal framework and structures. This partnership aims to empower young people with skills for employment and life improvement. Through targeted training and apprenticeships, it addresses local labour market needs, advancing workforce readiness and economic growth. The NSDS also encourages public-private partnerships to maximize impact on youth employment.</p>

Theories Underpinning Youth Development

Capability Approach

The Capability Approach asserts that well-being and development should be assessed by what individuals can do, emphasizing the importance of the kinds of lives people lead and the choices they make. Unlike traditional development methods that focus on GNP per capita and income, this approach includes physical, social, psychological, and environmental well-being.

Sen's Capability Approach challenges the traditional view of development as economic growth, proposing a paradigm shift where the focus is on individuals rather than the economy, and progress is measured by human capabilities and freedom instead of income. Sen (1999) argues that young people should develop various skills to become self-sufficient and improve their capabilities. He emphasizes the importance of "well-being and agency," assessing well-being through valuable states such as being well-nourished, healthy, and educated. Sen contends that certain basic functions, like access to education, health, and nutrition, are essential for achieving a standard of living. Freedom, according to Sen, involves having the ability to make rational choices that shape one's destiny. Development, therefore, is about increasing human freedom and enabling individuals to choose what they value.

This approach places human beings at the centre of progress and development, focusing on improving human lives. Many countries are shifting from an economic-centric view of development to one that prioritizes human well-being, as reflected in improved human development indices globally. The Capability Approach informs youth empowerment by advocating for skill improvement, which is crucial given South Africa's high unemployment rate. It suggests that development should address public policy, poverty, inequality, and social performance. This theory highlights key elements essential for youth development, such as individual capability, life opportunities, participatory approaches, and the role of individual agency, providing valuable insights for this study.

Theory of change

Many scholars have used the theory of change (ToC) as a conceptual tool to design and evaluate social action programmes. According to Oxfam (2015:7), there are three main crucial routes (change pathways) to support youth empowerment in societies. The first change pathway encourages the participation of youth in youth empowerment programmes. Both young females and males are required to work together to find a common path to achieve a collective objective or individually to find their path following collection action. Participation of both groups in decision-making is fundamental for introducing innovative solutions for community development. Authorities within communities should give the youth the much-needed voice to influence change through enabling communication channels.

In the second change pathway, the ToC encourages young men and women across various regions to organize a collection action. This is enabled through exercising transparency and accountability on how youth programmes are being undertaken. Youth leaders need to be open, exercise good communication and provide feedback which is vital to the youth and relevant stakeholders. Networking with youth is core to achieving youth empowerment. Affected young men and women need to share ideas on how their communities should sustain poverty and economic inequalities (World Bank, 2012). In the third change pathway, youth (men and women) need to be active in institutions that make decisions. They should participate in government meetings, NGOs and private sector corporations to make their voices heard on how they want the youth to be developed. Organizations tend to undervalue youth decisions which hinder youth empowerment.

The Capability Approach, developed by Amartya Sen, and the Theory of Change are both influential frameworks in addressing youth empowerment in South Africa. These frameworks emphasize a rounded view of development, focusing on enhancing individual capabilities, ensuring equitable access to resources, and encouraging sustainable socio-economic progress. The Capability Approach centres on what individuals can do and achieve in their lives, emphasizing human well-being and freedom. Sen (1999) argues that development should be assessed by the real opportunities available to people, focusing on their ability to lead lives they value. In the context of South African youth empowerment, this approach highlights several key elements.

First, holistic development involves not only economic factors but also social, psychological, and environmental well-being. Programs should aim to improve health, education, and social inclusion (Nussbaum, 2011). Second, capacity building is essential for empowering youth through education and skills training, enabling them to become self-sufficient and competitive in the job market (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Third, ensuring access to resources such as education, healthcare, and financial services is critical, as it removes barriers and creates equal opportunities for all (Robeyns, 2005). Fourth, policies should aim to integrate marginalized youth into mainstream economic and social activities, reducing inequalities and create a more inclusive society (Alkire, 2002). Lastly, encouraging youth participation in decision-making processes ensures that their voices are heard, and their needs are addressed, advancing a sense of agency and ownership (Sen, 1999).

The Theory of Change is a comprehensive framework used to plan, implement, and evaluate interventions. It involves mapping out the pathway from inputs to desired outcomes, making it particularly useful for youth empowerment strategies in South Africa. Strategic interventions are specific actions designed to achieve empowerment goals, such as implementing skills training programs, entrepreneurship initiatives, and mentorship schemes (Connell & Klem, 2000). Pathways of change involve identifying the logical sequence of activities that lead to the desired outcomes. For instance, providing vocational training leads to improved skills, which enhances employability and economic independence (Weiss, 1995). Engaging various stakeholders, including government agencies, private sector partners, NGOs, and the youth themselves, is crucial for the success of empowerment programs. Collaborative efforts ensure comprehensive support and resource mobilization (Patton, 2011).

Monitoring and evaluation establish robust mechanisms to track progress and assess the impact of interventions, ensuring that programs are effective and can be adjusted as needed. Continuous feedback loops are essential for adapting strategies and improving outcomes (Rogers, 2014). Ensuring that empowerment initiatives are sustainable involves creating long-term plans that continue to benefit youth beyond the initial intervention period. This includes creating an enabling environment and building institutional capacities (United Nations Development Programme, 2009). Measuring success based on tangible improvements in youth capabilities and well-being, rather than just economic indicators, aligns with the broader goals of the Capability Approach (Sen, 2004). In South Africa, integrating the Capability Approach and the Theory of Change provides a robust framework for youth empowerment. By focusing on holistic development, capacity building, and ensuring access to resources, these frameworks promote social inclusion and active participation. Strategic interventions and well-defined pathways of change, supported by stakeholder engagement and rigorous monitoring, ensure that initiatives are effective and sustainable. Ultimately, this integrated approach aims to enhance the capabilities and freedoms of South African youth, enabling them to contribute meaningfully to their communities and the broader society.

4. METHODOLOGY

A research approach is a strategy that guides researchers in finding answers to the study's research questions (Neuman, 2014). This study uses a qualitative research approach and a case study design, to understand the role of officials and youth in youth empowerment programmes based on their experiences and perspectives. Neumann, (2014) states that "paradigm is a general organising framework for theory and research that include basic assumptions, key issues, models of quality research and methods of answering questions. This study took an interpretivism paradigm, as shown in its use of qualitative methods to guide its enquiry. Data was collected using an interview schedule for individual and focus groups as well as a document review of key selected documents. A sample from the Local Municipality consisting of 38 people was divided into 30 youth and 8 officials, using purposive sampling. Transcripts and field notes from the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Qualitative data analysis included the following steps - firstly; data from document review and interview transcripts was coded and categorised into themes; secondly, the researcher selected and

described the data from the interviews to answer the research questions; thirdly, the researcher explained how to make sense of the data. The researcher then identified key emerging themes based on the descriptive and explanatory narrative. Each theme was provided with a detailed narrative based on multiple data sources. Finally, the researcher deduced key findings and recommendations for his study.

5. FINDINGS

This section comprehensively analyses the data to address several pivotal research questions. The first research question looks into the context, purpose, objectives, assumptions, claims, gaps, and the planned theory of change associated with national youth empowerment programmes aimed at job creation. The second question scrutinizes the implementation theory of change, highlighting the strengths, challenges, weaknesses, risks, and threats that Mhlontlo Local Municipality faces in executing these youth empowerment initiatives. The third question explores various strategies the Municipality can employ to enhance job creation for the youth. The section also ensures a thorough presentation of the findings by identifying and describing emerging thematic areas that intersect with all research questions. The analysis will be guided by essential concepts from the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, including the theory of change, holistic human development, capability, the role of individual agency, the use of participatory approaches, active participation and voice in institutions, collaboration, and collective action to ensure transparency and accountability.

Theory of Change and Youth Empowerment

The theory of change is a detailed and explicit framework that illustrates and explains how changes are anticipated to occur within a specific context and in relation to a particular intervention, grounded in a set of assumptions. This framework outlines how planned inputs and activities are expected to produce specific outputs, which subsequently contribute to desired outcomes and long-term impacts. It carefully considers the assumptions made during the policy design stage that are essential for effective implementation. The implicit theory of change articulated in the National Youth Empowerment Policy is illustrated below, showcasing the structured pathway from intervention activities to the achievement of significant and sustainable results.

Table 2. Theory of Change of the National Youth Empowerment Policy – Author Construction

Input	Activities	Output	Outcome	Impact
National Youth Empowerment Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Managing the grant programme ▪ Co-coordinating youth training programmes ▪ Funding the youth, in terms of starting businesses, and mentoring them where necessary ▪ Strengthening state capability ▪ To monitor and report on the implementation of youth policy and programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Grant programme managed ▪ Empowered youth ▪ Funded Youth ▪ Organs of state with the capacity to deal with youth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Skilled and ethical government workforce to manage youth development and empowerment programmes ▪ Entrepreneurs able to create and sustain jobs for youth ▪ Employed youth in decent jobs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Improved livelihood ▪ Improved economy

The diagram above illustrates the comprehensive pathway through which the National Youth Empowerment Policy, as an input, is designed to achieve significant socio-economic benefits. Key activities under this policy include managing grant programmes, coordinating youth training initiatives, funding youth-led business ventures, and strengthening governmental capacity to effectively address youth-related issues. These activities are strategically aimed at producing several critical outputs: a well-managed grant programme, empowered and funded youth, and state organs equipped to tackle youth problems.

The anticipated outputs are expected to lead to several impactful outcomes, including the development of a skilled and ethical government workforce capable of managing youth development and empowerment programmes, the emergence of entrepreneurs who can create and sustain jobs for

the youth, and increased employment of youth in decent jobs. Ultimately, these outcomes are intended to contribute to the broader impacts of an improved economy and enhanced livelihoods for the community. In reviewing the National Youth Empowerment Policy, several critical limitations and gaps have been identified. Firstly, the policy lacks an explicit and clear theory of change to elucidate how the planned inputs, activities, and outputs will contribute to the desired outcomes and impacts. The theory of change presented above was reconstructed by the researcher based on an in-depth review of the official youth policy.

Secondly, the policy does not outline the resource implications in terms of funding and human resources necessary for its implementation. Furthermore, the policy fails to establish clear and realistic assumptions for the implementation of youth programmes within municipalities, which are essential for guiding effective execution. Another significant gap is the absence of a robust monitoring and evaluation framework to track policy implementation, ensure accountability for budget allocation, and measure programme performance. Additionally, the policy does not embrace the philosophy of holistic human development and the capability model, which are crucial for addressing the multifaceted needs of the youth. It also neglects to place the youth at the centre of its initiatives, thereby overlooking the enhancement of individual agency and collaboration. Moreover, the policy fails to leverage youth and citizen collective action to demand transparency and accountability from governmental institutions.

These deficiencies highlight the need for a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to youth empowerment that fully integrates these critical components. The implementation theory of change measures the performance of the youth empowerment programmes and job creation opportunities in terms of efficiency and effectiveness in Mhlontlo Local Municipality.

To measure the efficiency and effectiveness of the youth programme the data was organized and analyzed under the following key questions:

- What were the enabling/disabling conditions for the implementation of youth empowerment programmes in Mhlontlo Local Municipality?
- How efficient and effective was the implementation of the youth empowerment programme?
- Is there clarity of purpose of the youth programme by senior managers to guide implementation?

- Did the municipality adapt the national youth empowerment policy?

A. What were the enabling/disabling conditions for the implementation of youth empowerment programmes in Mhlontlo Local Municipality?

The enabling or disabling conditions for the youth empowerment programme were described by different respondents below:

A senior municipal official who participated in the interviews said:

“If the Municipality is committed they must ensure that there is a youth policy in place, implemented successfully with the assistance of all stakeholders and managers (within the municipality), where there is a need for resources to be allocated, resources must be used effectively and efficiently. For example, when there is a need for a workshop or a seminar resources that are needed must be made available”.

A respondent who is employed to be in charge of the youth programme said that:

“Organizational commitment is of the essence when it comes to the empowerment of the youth and to making sure that unemployment is eradicated, as this normally translates to organizational culture emanating from collective involvement, committing to the objectives of the department with the same mindset tends to improve the expected results”.

One respondent at the focus group discussion stated that:

“There must be consultation, organizations must be committed to youth empowerment, they must have a voice they must be always allowed to view their opinions and lead the process themselves”.

Based on the above analysis of interview data the following enabling conditions were identified by municipal managers for the effective implementation of the youth empowerment policy in Mhlontlo Local Municipality – the municipality needs to have a local youth development policy, capable leadership from the municipality, approved resources, efficient and effective use

of resources, enabling organizational culture and commitment, stakeholder participation and active voice, and buy-in municipal youth development programmes.

B. *How efficient and effective was the implementation of the youth empowerment programme in Mhlontlo Local Municipality?*

Based on the interview data and review of performance data, it was found that the municipal youth empowerment programme in Mhlontlo Local Municipality was efficient in achieving its planned target in terms of age category, but ineffective in achieving its outcomes since the programme failed to employ target unemployed youth in rural areas in the Municipality.

This assessment of the efficiency and effectiveness of the municipal youth programme was corroborated by the response of a senior official who said:

“Although the programme was implemented, it was not implemented as planned. The target group in terms of age (in the context of South Africa and Mhlontlo Local Municipality) was achieved but I am of the view that as the Municipality we should have went down to deep rural areas within the Municipality where poverty really exists, don’t get me wrong those targeted and on the programme also deserved to be there because they themselves needed to be trained and acquire skills so that they can be employed as they were and some of them still unemployed.”

The youth programme failed to achieve its planned outcomes since the trained youth were still unemployed nor did they start their own businesses due to them not having the capital. The programme also failed to target unemployed youth in rural areas in the Municipality.

Another respondent who highlighted that most trained youth were unemployed, said that:

“Although the programme had good intentions and the young ones recruited to be on the programme the outcome was not achieved because most of them are not on the system they are still out there and not employed, and they still did not manage to start their own businesses because when asked they say that even

though they have the skills they do not have the means (in terms of capital) to start their own businesses due to lack of funding which means the ultimate goal still is not achieved of ending unemployment with positive impact of economic growth."

According to conducted interviews, most respondents voiced out that unemployed young people were trained by the Municipality, but not a single one of them was absorbed because of budget constraints. The respondents pointed out that there was a lack of readiness by the Municipality when it came to developing young people because they were trained and never absorbed in employment by the municipality. These trained youths with the skills are still unemployed.

C. *Is there clarity of purpose of the youth programme by senior managers to guide implementation?*

Based on responses from a sample of senior managers it can be inferred that senior management were clear about the purpose of the youth development programme in the Mhlontlo Local Municipality.

One of the senior managers described the purpose of the youth programme as:

"Job creation assists those who are unemployed and creates more job opportunities for those who are educated and in need of practical training."

Another manager went on to say:

"Chapter 4 of the Skills Development Act 97 of 1998 states that a SETA may establish a leadership as long as there is a structured learning component, the leadership must have a structured work experience component".

Furthermore, from the responses from managers in the Mhlontlo Local Municipality, municipal managers acknowledged that the principle of youth participation is vital since youth are the ones who are at the forefront of looking for opportunities discussing ideas and networking to finding strategic and sustainable ways to earn a living in wake of high unemployment. They further indicated that many programmes offered by the municipality require the collective participation of youth for instance in furniture making, traffic

management and forestry management training, youth need maximum participation so that youth unemployment and poverty can be mitigated.

One respondent said that:

“The youth at Mhlontlo are encouraged to participate so that they benefit from the activities meant for them at the Mhlontlo Municipality, but the Municipality must go on road shows and make the young people aware ...there are youth forums that represent the youth in matters that are of interest to them and will benefit them”.

D. *Did the municipality adapt the national youth empowerment policy?*

In South Africa, municipalities must adopt the national youth empowerment policy to develop localized versions to address specific regional challenges and leverage unique local opportunities. National policies provide a broad framework, but local contexts vary widely in terms of socioeconomic conditions, available resources, and prevalent youth issues. A municipality-specific policy allows for targeted interventions that consider the unique needs of the local youth, promoting inclusivity and effectiveness. This approach not only ensures better resource allocation and program implementation but also enhances community engagement and accountability. Critically, without localized adaptation, national policies risk being too generalized, potentially overlooking the nuanced realities of diverse communities and thereby failing to achieve their intended impact at the grassroots level. Respondents argued that the ineffectiveness of the implementation of policy was due to the Municipality using the National policy, and not developing its youth development policy to respond to local context and realities.

The following responses from respondents support the above claim:

“The municipality is using the national youth policy; it would be better for the municipality to have its own policy.”

“The municipality does not have a policy on youth development programme “the municipality is using the National Youth Policy.”

6. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The analysis of the Integrated Development Plan (IDP) 2017-22 of Mhlontlo Local Municipality highlights a critical gap in addressing youth unemployment directly through local development policies. While the municipality relied on the National Youth Policy, it did not develop a tailored youth development policy to suit its specific context. This reliance on a national framework without local adaptation risks misalignment with the unique socio-economic realities of the Mhlontlo municipality. National policies, while comprehensive, often lack the granularity required to address localized challenges effectively. The review of the National Youth Policy revealed several limitations that hindered its implementation at the municipal level. These included inadequate provisions for funding and human resources, an unclear theory of change, unrealistic implementation assumptions, and an absence of a robust monitoring and evaluation framework. These gaps undermined the policy's effectiveness in driving youth development programs in Mhlontlo, as it failed to provide a clear roadmap for transforming inputs and activities into desired outcomes and impacts. The lack of a specific and responsive policy framework, combined with insufficient budget allocation and personnel, further exacerbated these issues.

Interviews with stakeholders revealed a lack of political will and leadership to champion youth empowerment initiatives. The IDP 2017-22 did not reflect a concerted effort to address the pressing issues faced by the local youth, indicating a disconnect between policy formulation and implementation. While the National Youth Policy theoretically illustrated a pathway to improving the economy and livelihoods through youth programs, the practical implementation in Mhlontlo diverged significantly from this model. The lack of financial resources, stakeholder buy-in, and coherent strategy resulted in ineffective outcomes, with trained youth not securing employment. The municipality's youth empowerment programs, though efficient in targeting specific age categories, failed to achieve their intended outcomes of job creation and economic improvement. This ineffectiveness was attributed to the absence of a sustainable strategy to combat youth unemployment. The inadequate budget, insufficient human resources, and lack of managerial capacity further compounded the problem, preventing meaningful progress in youth development. Despite acknowledging the importance of youth participation in various municipal programs, the actual

implementation showed a lack of engagement from all stakeholders. This highlighted the need for robust support and commitment from political leaders, municipal managers, and the community. Establishing a dedicated youth structure could facilitate better collaboration and coordination, ensuring that youth voices are heard, and their needs addressed. Some of the direct recommendations we make include:

- ***Developing a Local Youth Empowerment Policy:*** Formulate a tailored youth empowerment policy as part of the IDP, ensuring the policy is responsive to local socio-economic conditions and youth challenges.
- ***Adopt the Capability Approach:*** Re-orient priorities to address unemployment, poverty, and inequality. Use available resources and seek additional funding for youth job creation.
- ***Develop a Clear Theory of Change:*** Develop a theory of change to align policy and implementation. Plan for resources, manage risks, and establish a monitoring and evaluation framework.
- ***Ensure Leadership Buy-In:*** Secure commitment and championship at the political level and across all management levels.
- ***Enhance Communication and Collaboration:*** Establish effective communication mechanisms and engage youth in decision-making processes through regular workshops and information-sharing sessions.
- ***Source External Funding:*** Seek funding from other organizations, including the private sector, to support youth development programs.
- ***Empower Youth for Community Development:*** Encourage trained youth to use their skills for community development and mobilize both male and female youth groups for collective action and accountability.

In conclusion, the Mhlontlo Local Municipality's experience underscores the necessity for municipalities to develop localised youth empowerment policies that are contextually relevant and resource-backed. Effective implementation requires capable leadership, adequate resources, a supportive organisational culture, and active stakeholder participation. Without these elements, the goals of reducing youth unemployment and advancing economic development remain unattainable, thereby compromising the overall efficacy of youth empowerment initiatives (Theron & Ceasar, 2008; Morrow, Panday & Richter, 2005).

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