



The influence of local economic development in poverty alleviation within Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality, South Africa

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is to evaluate the influence of local economic development (LED) in poverty alleviation in municipalities using Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality as a case paper. LED is essential as it involves identifying and using primarily local resources and skills to ensure or stimulate local economic growth and community development. Municipalities are responsible to ensure the promotion of LED initiatives to alleviate poverty. This paper was motivated by fact that there is lack of promotion of LED projects, high rate of poverty and unemployment and other socio-economic related issues that is occurring in communities within Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality. Although the Municipality is continuing with the implementation of LED strategy but high rate of poverty and unemployment persist. Lack of capacity, incorrect interpretation or implementation of LED and resource constrains are some of the factors that contribute to failure of LED implementation in municipalities even though they are policies or guidelines in place. LED implementation in Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality is constraints by many factors which hinder it to achieving economic development and poverty alleviation. The Municipality have challenges such as lack of budget, political interference in the allocation of LED projects, double dipping of projects, dependency syndrome of LED projects, LED strategies which do not address socio-economic challenges of communities, absence of monitoring and evaluation. Local economic development must contribute effectively on poverty alleviation and should have strong social focus.

Keywords: Local Economic Development; Poverty Alleviation; Implementation; Strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

Local economic development (LED) is a relatively approach to develop and is currently seen as a prominent strategy to tackle the problem of unemployment and poverty in South Africa and to provide a bottom up approach to economic development (Makamo, 2020; Jili, 2019; Hilliard & Wissink, 1996). LED forms part of the economic and social development mandate given by section 152 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996 (Constitution) to local authorities. Several academics, government officials and development practitioners in the private and public, as well as the non-governmental sectors agree that LED plays a crucial role in job creation, poverty alleviation and on improving standards of living (Abozeid, 2017). Mokoena (2019) contends that LED is meant to improve economic growth but in South African context it prioritise poverty alleviation with exclusion of previously disadvantaged groups. This article argues that LED has potential of restructuring the economy of South Africa to alleviate poverty. Mumba and Van der Walddt, (2022); and Nkwinika and Munzhedzi, (2016:76) are of views that LED is generally aimed at building the economic capacity of a specific locality to improve its economic future and quality of life for all.

Municipalities need to engage with communities and the private sector in prioritising and designing appropriate LED strategies that unlock local potential to attract more investors to address poverty (Mashiteng, 2017; Van Rooyen, 2013). The municipalities have developed various strategies to deal with challenges of socio-economic conditions in their respective municipalities which included LED plan. The challenges in the implementation of developed strategies and programmes were lack of capital investment, skills shortage and access to market (Selemela, Mathebula & Munzhedzi 2022). "It is

inevitable that LED is experienced in various forms ranging from urban entrepreneurialism to rural survival strategies. In many cases where LED was in its early stages government and municipalities were often still in the first phases of policy development and application, therefore it would be difficult to claim significant, concrete results" (Tefu, 2002:73). In support of Mumba and Van der Wald, (2023) Bartik (2020) states that LED strategies and policies must always be aligned to achieve quality job creation and targets individual businesses with the goal of catalysing broader benefits of poverty reduction.

Theoretical Overview: Local Economic Development

Local economic development (LED) is a complex field of study that includes economic development policies and local infrastructure development policies which are essential to the context of LED initiative aimed at enhancing local communities. The theoretical framework of this paper is grounded on development theory and the neo-classical economic theory

Development theory. Development theory explains how desirable changes in society can be effected in the most effective way to address socio-economic challenges. Todaro and Smith (2012) define development as a multidimensional process that involves significant changes in social structures, popular attitudes, and national institutions, as well as economic growth, reduction in inequality, and elimination of poverty. The supporters of this theory posits that development should progress towards poverty elimination, promotion of equality which guarantee human rights for all and employment generation (Maela, Matloga & Zitha, 2024:173). Additionally, this theory emphasizes that development is primarily dependent on economic and social structures and procedures for better

standards of living. (Antwi, 2019). This theory correlates to the current study since it seeks to enhance the standards of living by addressing poverty and improve economic growth through LED initiatives (Mumba & van der Wald, 2023; Khenisa, 2020; Todaro & Smith, 2012).

The neo-classical economic theory.

Blakely and Bradshaw (2002:58) stipulate that some authors of these theory support the development that limit equal benefit to different groups to alleviate poverty. This theory has ability to promote markets within the community and provide the platform to ensure that local resources are utilized in efficient manner to attract capital and reduce inequality for development of the community. To support this, Nel and Humphrys (1999:277) postulate that LED is a strategy in which local communities use resources to modify and expand local economic activities for the benefit of the majority in a local community. The application of the Neo-Classical framework within the Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality with consideration of poor socio-economic development status, the municipality should intervene through the implementation of LED approaches and strategies by addressing community challenges such as poverty (Malele, 2018). LED as part of the classical economics is geared towards growth and development. To attract the market of community to be recognised in LED, Ramafamba (2009:16) suggests that training which is complemented by programmes to enhance the value of local people is important approach toward realization of economic development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of municipalities in the promotion of LED for poverty alleviation

Local government's developmental mandate from the Constitution and the White Paper on Local Government (1998), encourages municipalities to seek to address poverty, unemployment and

redistribution in their local areas. Municipalities are expected to draft IDP which must contain LED strategies that aim to address poverty since "IDP is regarded as a tool to assist municipalities in achieving their developmental mandates" (Mathebula, 2018:564). Mashamaite (2018) postulate that municipalities can promote LED in their areas in different ways as they assume different roles at different times, and they may play a more direct role as facilitator in some LED initiatives than in others. Therefore, every effort to grow a local economy will require some input, participation and support from local municipalities. Local authorities can and must play a central role in LED by virtue of their powers and functions on the local level (Netshakhuma, 2006:65).

Municipalities in South Africa have a Constitutional mandate to promote local economic development. Section 153 of the Constitution state that a municipality must structure and manage its administration, and budgeting and planning processes to give priority to the basic needs of the community, and to promote the social and economic development of the community. Municipalities must play active role both as policymakers and as institutions of local democracy and are urged to become strategic, visionary and ultimately influential in the way they operate, (Rogerson, 2010). The municipalities continue to adopt the role of developmental local government, which is obligate local authorities towards promoting and capacitating the local people, and hence improving the standard of living through socio-economic development (Mashamaite, 2018; Mbeba, 2014:91).

LED as strategic tool for poverty alleviation in Local Government

LED is seen as important strategic tool to address socio-economic challenges faced by the local government (Mumba & van der Wald, 2023; Koma, 2013). To support this, Mufamadi (2000:1) attest that LED serve as

important outcome based local strategic initiative which is driven by local stakeholders for the support of local government economic growth for poverty reduction. Municipalities has duty to come up with effective mechanisms that encourage community and business engagement on implementation of LED projects. LED in local government plays active role in identifying and using primarily local resources, ideas and skills to stimulate economic growth and development for communities. Malele (2018:1) postulate that although LED is regarded as the local government responsibility, there are other role players who could contribute to its success, but who tend to be marginalized. Municipalities are tasked to play facilitation role to coordinate private sector partnerships on LED initiative to create access to finance, technological knowledge, entrepreneurial experience and job generation concerns of the public sector (Rogerson, 2010a:443; Nel and Rogerson, 2007). The local government has to initiate LED as the strategy with objective of achieving effective job creation, poverty alleviation and skills development (Koma, 2014; Ramukumba, 2012). LED can be used as one of the tools necessary for reversing the economic injustices imposed on some local communities by the previous apartheid state (Mokoena, 2019; 59; Human, Lochner & Botes, 2008:56;).

The relationship between LED and poverty

Although Jili (2019:19) point out that, several studies differ on the explanation and the description of the effects, or the significance of LED on poverty reduction. However, Karoly and Novaro (2016), see LED as a tool to alleviate poverty and the two concept intertwine. LED has a direct effect on the livelihoods of communities and proper implementation of LED initiatives could foster the social and

economic development in local communities. According to Isaacs (2006:34), despite the growing amount of literature available on LED, there seems to be only a limited focus on the contribution of LED to poverty alleviation. LED provides mechanisms to improve the economic activities of the localities, but without the inclusion of social developmental goals, it would seem to be unsustainable. Rogerson, (2001) as cited in Ramukumba (2012:10) note that LED is an integrated, multi-disciplinary approach aimed at poverty alleviation through pro-poor economic growth. However, in the African context, LED goes further than just enhancing economic growth, but prioritises poverty alleviation and greater inclusion of previously excluded groups (Mokoena, 2019: 60).

LED challenges prohibiting poverty alleviation using Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality as a case study

LED faces several challenges in the Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality noting that number of areas around the Municipality are predominantly rural and require enormous support in order to uplift them economically (Mahlalela, 2014). The Municipality has created LED strategies since 2007, the most recent being the 2021-2026 LED Strategy Review (Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality, 2021-2026). However, all created LED strategies outline similar and persistent problems that the Municipality still facing which entails that LED initiatives still have a long way in making significant effects to address poverty within the municipality. For example, insufficient trained and skilled staff is continuous challenge as outlined from LED strategies as from 2007 to date at Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality. The capacity challenges facing LED unit is one of set-back for Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality to drastically address poverty (Ariatti, 2013). A key element to the success

of LED initiatives is the availability of skills and the competency of workers. As most workers in LED projects within the Municipality are regarded as low to medium skilled, capacity building should form part of all projects (Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality, 2019:150). Mokoena (2019:72) argues that lack of capacity means poor policy implementation, and poor policy implementation means poor service delivery and poor service delivery means negative policy impact on local communities.

Challenge of managing participation at the local level

According to Rogerson (2006:44), participation in LED is largely emphasised on organised sectors, such as the government, private sector, civil societies and organised labour, as these organised institutions at national and provincial level. These institutions at their scale, and in terms of numbers and levels of organization, warrants that the four social partners can partake in summits and negotiations of an economic nature. The design of institutions at a local level is not conducive to social partners being held jointly accountable for decision-making and implementation, (Netshakhuma, 2006). This thus bring to the fore another challenge of Institution building and organisational design to facilitate a new institutionalism approach, which has not yet been addressed in a significant manner by scholars and practitioners of LED.

Challenge of addressing poverty through LED

Mashiteng (2017:32) indicate that there are concerns that most of the municipalities in South Africa do not have adequate LED strategies in place to address the issues of poverty, unemployment and inequality. Meyer (2014) concurs with Mashiteng (2017) that municipalities are unable to create consistent economic growth strategy to address the problem of

poverty and unemployment. The present socio-economic environment in South Africa of excessively high unemployment rate, deep levels of poverty, a widening gap between rich and poor, there is raging debate between leaders at local levels, about pro-poor strategies versus pro-growth strategies. It is quite plausible to understand where the debate is stemming from as; the different stakeholders hold different views about what LED is. It should be noted that LED must not replace and be confused with social welfare services which offers for numerous services focusing on basic welfare needs and not necessarily economic development (Meyer-Stamer, 2003:15). It is significant that this should not actually be taking place as LED should be about considering both pro-growth and pro-poor strategies.

The challenge of local government incapacity

One of the major shortcomings of LED implementation is the lack of capacity in as far as human and capital resources within municipalities (Malele, 2018). The traditional focus of local government means that there is effectively cadre of trained LED experts in the country, especially within small centres, as compared to larger centres who in turn rely on the skills of their current larger and skilled workforce, such as their planners and accountants. Thus, there is the urgent need for training of LED officials and to expose councillors to the concept (Nel, 2001:34). The issues of capacity challenges in local municipalities goes back to the time when the government of South Africa realised that the majority of municipalities were staffed with personnel incapable of carrying out the service delivery mandate (IDASA, 2010 cited in Mashiteng 2017). It is regrettably reported that there are small municipalities that cannot afford to attract better and capable skills for poverty reduction (South Africa Local Government Association, 2010). Capacity challenge need

to be addressed in order to ensure sustainability of LED

RESEARCH METHOD

A qualitative case paper design was followed to probe effects of local economic development in poverty alleviation whereby data was analysed through thematic content analysis. The article adopted a qualitative approach through conducting interviews with 20 officials in order to gain a deeper understanding of LED challenges that prohibits poverty alleviation at local level within Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality as case paper. Additionally, this paper utilised robust literature review, LED strategies, IDP document and semi-structured interviews to explore more on the effects of LED in poverty alleviation at Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality (Jili, 2019). The reason for using an exploratory type of paper was to establish all the relevant factors that promote or hamper effects of LED initiatives meant to alleviate poverty, so as to come up with possible approaches to assist with improving service delivery and poverty alleviation within the LED context (Mashiteng, 2017). This also abetted the researcher to understand and interpret the LED initiatives that exist within this municipality and how they address issues such as poverty and unemployment. The special focus was more on municipal officials who are directly and indirectly responsible for LED implementation. The data analysis used in this paper was a qualitative thematic analysis method which involves description, classification of the data into themes, and sub-themes and interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative data gathered in this paper were analysed through thematic analysis. The thematic content analysis helped to formulate themes and sub-

themes that emerged from the interviews. The following key themes and sub-themes were identified in this paper: Effectiveness of LED initiatives in Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality; LED as a strategy for poverty alleviation in rural municipalities; The challenges of associated with LED that prevents poverty alleviation in Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality.

Effectiveness of LED initiatives in Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality

In order to understand how functional LED within the municipality, each participant was asked to indicate the effectiveness of LED and the following were revealed: There is still a room for improvement in LED unit especially on the main business seminars and non-financial support services (Participants 12).

Currently, LED is inadequate in Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality due insufficient budget allocation. This due to poor understanding of LED internally in the municipality. The municipality have not yet internalised the understanding of LED to the staff, because is overshadowed by municipal infrastructure services such as water, sanitation and collection of waste. LED unit in Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality is constrained by inadequate staff which make the programme not to be effective (Participants 08).

Not much effective due to current political climate which not conducive to LED activities and programmes. There is consistent political interference in the allocation and support of LED projects. Political infighting disturbs process flow of LED (Participants 4).

Ineffectiveness of LED is attributed by human capacity and financial constraints in the municipality. Actually, in honest fact is not functional (Participants 10)

It was also noticed that political factors impede the institutionalization of LED, particularly by displacing LED's arrangements. This concurs with

Mashiteng (2017:27) who alluded that project prioritisation often falls into the hands of politicians, who may have agendas that contradict the LED goals. In the event of LED projects falling to the quick-win and anchor projects trap, municipalities find themselves bending to the whims of the politicians who attempt to quell the communities' mounting unhappiness. (Mashiteng 2017; Koma, 2012). The findings revealed that LED within the Municipality is not much effective. This supported by 90% of the participants who indicated that LED is not functional in the Municipality due to internal capacity and financial constraints. Municipality must internalise understanding of LED, so that is not used as basic service delivery programme only. The political interference in LED activities has an intent to destabilise objective of LED. While 10% of the respondents indicated that LED is effective because forums have been set up with many stakeholders to address the developmental challenges. It is of the researcher's observation that LED initiatives are not much visible within the communities. The objective of those LED forums must be to enhance LED activities rather than simply to ensure compliance.

It can be suggested that LED outreach activities should involve all the key role players for purpose of economic development. In line with the above, Jili (2019: 2) mentioned that, local government, communities and stakeholders must understand their contribution as crucial role players in implementation of LED initiatives.

LED as a strategy for poverty alleviation in rural municipalities

The sub-theme emanated from the use of LED as poverty reduction for the communities. In order to examine how LED can be used as strategy for poverty alleviation the participants revealed the following:

Participant 18 postulated that LED if can be implemented correctly within the municipality can alleviate poverty through provision of knowledge, skills and training to allow community participation in the local economy. LED can be used as a tool to uplift the community development centres.

LED cannot be used as the lone strategy for reducing poverty; the municipality must also engage other stakeholders in a coordinated effort to do so (Participant 6).

For each and every Municipality LED is a key component which deals directly with the communities for purpose of economic development and poverty alleviation. The municipality should have LED strategies in place to achieve the objectives of the programmes (Participant 2).

LED initiatives are geared towards poverty alleviation. Yes, LED is relevant method, but it need to tap into industrialisation activities for achieving mass job creation (Participant 14).

LED can be used as tool for poverty eradication but the municipality must have a way to link community produced products to the local market. The municipality must implement laws which enforce well established local retailers to buy from local producers. For example, chicken broiler farmers within the municipality must be able to supply their products (eggs etc) to local markets (retailers) such as Shoprite checkers in order to avoid buying leakages by well-established retailers. This method will allow community participation in the economic growth and create jobs while reducing poverty.

Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality has many buying leakages as many of its citizen's venture outside the municipality to do most of their shopping. It is of importance that local producers are developed so as keep more business within the municipality. Strengthening local businesses through LED initiatives will lead

to a constant growth of SMMEs, which will also bring in job opportunities and reduce buying leakages out of the municipality (Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality IDP, 2021-2026). The above view is in agreement with Rogerson (2013) who highlights that issues of market limitation or lack of access to markets because of geographical location experienced by many small enterprises providing goods and services in rural areas should be dealt with to ensure sustainability of rural entrepreneurs to reduce poverty. Rogerson (2013) further proposed that, this can be addressed through expanded access to market opportunities from both private and public-sector procurement.

From above, 100% participants agreed that LED is one of the strategies to alleviate poverty but a municipality should play their role through facilitation of training, skills development and market access. The finding is in line with literature that municipalities should execute their role of facilitator, net-worker and monitor on LED initiatives to improve participation of communities in local economy (Makamo, 2020; National Framework for LED in South Africa 2006 – 2011:16). This will assist the communities to be independent rather than relying on grants and unsustainable employment to reduce poverty. Consequently, other participants revealed that applicable LED strategies should be geared towards economic opportunities found within the Municipality to have impact on poverty alleviation. Other participants further hold the view that if LED can be implemented correctly it can alleviate poverty (Participant 1). To this end, LED should be able to unlock development opportunities to benefit the communities and business sector for poverty reduction.

Matlala and Motsepe (2015) concur with the above views that LED is an approach for resolving and eliminating poverty by generating employment at the

grassroots level (Kgobe, Mabeba, & Mamokhere, 2023). It can be suggested that LED projects initiatives can contribute to the economic development and resolve the issues of unemployment and result in poverty alleviation within disadvantaged communities. The municipality must ensure that they coordinate LED projects meant for poverty alleviation with other social development institutions to achieve the desired outcome. Above responses are in line with the White Paper on Local Government (1998) which identifies LED as a strategy towards poverty reduction as it emphasises that promoting growth and addressing poverty and inequality are the key objectives of LED (National Framework for LED in South Africa 2006 – 2011).

The challenges of LED that prevents poverty alleviation in Lepell-Nkumpi Local Municipality

The question was sought to find out from the participants if they are aware of any challenges relating to LED initiatives that prevent poverty reduction in the Municipality and the participants revealed the following:

LED unit performance is unsatisfactory or lacking behind and furthermore no sufficient resources and identification of new opportunities to address poverty through LED initiatives within the municipality (Participant 2).

Political interference on LED activities whereby if specific councillor is not interested in the projects that LED unit is implementing may stop to mobile the communities to support the projects. Even though the purpose of the projects is to alleviate poverty they often became compromised and end up not serving the purpose. Some of LED projects which are implemented need political buy-in from councillors to avoid sabotage (Participant 11).

Mayer (2013) asserts that without LED champions, the majority of LED long-

term programs will fail because politicians frequently control council budgets, and without political support, admirable projects risk being scaled back and shelved year after year.

Lack of identification of economic opportunities within the municipality, dependency syndrome of LED projects to government institutions and double dipping of funding. Conflict of interests of government or municipal officials which hamper progress and growth of initiated LED projects intended to resolve poverty (Participant 13).

LED strategies in Lepelle-Nkumpi Local municipality are not aligned with district and provincial LED strategy which hampers the coordination of the strategy in the implementation process (Participant 1).

The above statement concurs with Mokoena (2019) who argues that there is no common LED understanding between provincial, district and local municipalities, even though the legislation demands alignment of strategies and policies.

The main challenge includes lack of internal capacity and poor networking with relevant development partners or inability to network. No mechanism in place to identify the stakeholders or development partners which municipality must engage and formalise their agreements for purpose of economic development. For example, LEDA which is a key stakeholder owns Lebowakgomo Industrial area but Lepelle-Nkumpi municipality LED unit has not been able to engage LEDA in order to make sure the industrial area became functional or municipality joint hands together with LEDA to make it functional so that community can benefit from the industrial area (Participant 17).

From the difficulties outlined above half of participants (50%) noted that political interference by council members in LED projects and activities is viewed as a serious stumbling block for LED to alleviate poverty. Most LED projects meant to

achieve objective of poverty alleviation failed because of political interference in allocation of projects. This view concurs with Mokoena (2019:71) who postulate that councillors determine areas where LED projects will be implemented, without proper assessment of areas with potential. However, 30% of participants are of view that inability to identify economic opportunities and inactive stakeholder relations with development partners are challenges that prevent LED to reduce poverty. It is worth mentioning that the municipality cannot deal with issues of poverty alone it need to partner with NGOs and other role players with interest in LED.

While 20% of the participants reiterated that on challenge of insufficient resources (budget and capable staff) and dependency syndrome of LED projects to government institutions. The implemented LED projects should be sustainable for purpose of poverty alleviation and economic development. The above finding are in line with Mashiteng (2017:27) who hold view that project prioritisation often falls into the hands of politicians, who may have agendas that contradict the LED goals. To this end it can be suggested that political interference must be avoided at all cost and, instead politicians must support LED as a tool alleviate poverty in the communities.

RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

In conclusions it is evident through this paper that LED is the process of improving local economic growth, employment and poverty alleviation. The paper was highlighting the effects of LED in poverty alleviation. The Constitution requires local government to take the lead in fostering social and economic development of the local communities. From the paper, it is clear that the Municipality always implement the strategies to LED, but those strategies do not necessarily address socio-economic issues as there is still lot of challenges the municipality encountering. The elimination

of political interference in LED projects can only be achieved through training of councillors, managers and administrators within the Municipality about importance of LED on sustainable development for poverty reduction and to gain their support. Neutral political support on implementation of LED initiatives is critical in achieving successful results of LED initiatives for poverty alleviation. The implementation of strong monitoring and evaluation of LED initiatives can contribute to success of LED activities. The strategies that are applied in LED should be suitable for problems and challenges that the communities experience towards development. Clearly there is need for a rural municipality such as Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality to review its LED strategies to ensure that all developmental issues of the community members that must be addressed through LED are achieved to improve local economy and poverty reduction goal.

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