



## Importance of Local Economic Development as a Strategy to Enhance Community Development Projects in Thulamela Local Municipality

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### **Abstract**

The study explores the importance of Local Economic Development (LED) in enhancing community development projects in Thulamela Local Municipality (TLM). South Africa attempts to combat unemployment, poverty, and inequality. The introduction of LED in municipalities aims to generate jobs and alleviate poverty prevalent in various communities across the country. The LED strategy leverages local resources, communities, public institutions, and private sector to generate employment, alleviate poverty in rural areas and addressing unemployment. The study used a Mixed Research Method (MRM). Interviews and questionnaire data was collected concurrently from two different sample sizes. Data collected through questionnaires was analysed, presented and interpreted. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data collected through interviews. The analysis results found four main themes namely, poverty, unemployment, job creation, local economy and skills. A sample size of (N=110) participants from TLM. Research findings indicates that LED is crucial in generating job opportunities, reducing poverty in local communities, and boosting economic growth. The study offers valuable insights for TLM policymakers to effectively implement LED projects, enhance job creation, and combat poverty. The study concludes that failure to implement an LED strategy country's high unemployment rate, poverty, low income, inequality, low skills, and will significantly hinder economic development.

**Keywords:** *Local Economic Development (LED); Community Development Projects; Poverty; Unemployment; Thulamela Local Municipality*

### **Introduction**

South Africa is faced with the challenge of unemployment, poverty and inequality even after the apartheid government. The new South Africa however, acknowledges that the country has the problem through Sections 152 and 153 of the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996*, makes provision for municipalities to be structured in such a way that they promote social and economic development. This had led to the development of Local Economic Development, mostly in local sphere of government.

The White Paper on Local Government (1998) provides LED in a manner of Developmental Local Government and is defined as the local government committed to working with citizens and groups within communities to find sustainable ways to meet their social, economic, and material needs and improve the quality of the lives of people. Legislations that guide LED include the following: *Local Government: Municipal Systems Act*, 2000 (Act No. 32 of 2000), *Local Government: Municipal Structures Act*, 1998 (Act No. 117 of 1998). These pieces of legislation provide for local government to start playing an important role in ensuring that social and economic development take place.

According to Meyer (2014), international researchers, development experts, and other stakeholders acknowledge the importance of Local Economic Development (LED) in creating jobs, alleviating poverty, and improving the quality of people's lives. Strydom (2016) asserts that increasing emphasis on LED has created attraction in South Africa since 1994, as legislators and local communities struggled with how to address the twin challenges of redressing historical imbalances in service delivery as a result of apartheid, with South Africa's increasing exposure to global economic factors. Masuku, Jili, and Selepe (2016) state that LED is when local people take control and responsibility for job development, and the economic well-being of the community, which will effect in poverty reduction.

Khosa (2012) states that in trying to deal with the problem of poverty, community development projects (CDPs) were introduced in the Thulamela Local Municipality. On the other hand, Melody and Zonyana (2017) posit that the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) is proving to be a key provider to the Local Economic Development, regardless of the challenges that municipalities face concerning implementation. Mahole (2017) asserts that LED encompasses identifying and using local resources, ideas, and skills to stimulate economic growth and development. This implies that to eradicate poverty, reduce unemployment, inequality, LED is the strategy that the Municipality can adopted. Community development projects will improve the living standard of the communities through income generation, developing skills and alleviate poverty.

### ***Theoretical Framework on Local Economic Development***

Lukhele and Madzivhandila (2018) point out that, location theory seeks to explain how organisations and businesses choose where to locate economic advancement. According to Kacar, Curic, and Ikic (2016), location theories offer different factors, of labour force, ability, technical, and organisational knowledge, social and institutional structures, and influence both investment and income. Szajnowska-Wysocka (2009) defines the locality as a net of difficult informal, social relations in a given region, determined by its local identity, culture, and tradition. Maloka *et al.*, (2014) maintain that LED is a process that is managed by the local officials following a constitutional obligation, to improve local communities. Rodriguez-Pose and Tijimstra (2005) argue that there is an improved competition between localities, together with the trends to decentralise authorities and resources to lower levels of government and create an opportunity for LED policies.

Lennert, Csatari, Farkas, and Mezoszentgyorgyi (2015) observe that a location theory is concerned with the geographic location of different types of economic activities and the determinants behind patterns. Kahika and Karyeija (2017:5), concur with Dyosi (2016) and add that location theory is a process whereby local resources, participation involving local institutions, and actors in development are crucial. Oduro-Ofori (2011) stresses that this approach to socioeconomic development focuses on localities and their resources, including the participation of all essential actors and the use of locally available resources. As indicated in Pillay (2010), the degree of ability of the location to sustain itself will determine the departure point taken to formulate an LED strategy, policy, and process for a certain geographical area. Reddy and Wallis (2012) acknowledge that locality is key to LED as the considerable emphasis is placed on both proactivity and mobilisation of local communities and individuals, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) labour and businesses.

## Conceptualization of Local Economic Development

Local Economic Development is a process whereby local government, private sector and communities form partnerships to mobilise, manage and capitalise resources effectively into economic ventures to promote the development and the growth of locality (Uganda National LED Policy 2014); & Kahika and Karyeija (2017). Mihalis and Ariatti (2015) state that LED is the process encompassing resources for competitive advantage by locally-owned courses of action, identified through participation and social dialogue, in a strategically defined territory. For this study LED is a process that involves partnerships amongst local government, private sectors, local communities and NGOs and the use of local resources to stimulate the local economy. On the other hand, Rodriguez-Pose and Tijimstra (2005) provide that the LED approach concerns itself with the development from below and supports the need for promoting economic development in all areas.

However, Mandisvika (2015) posit that LED is a process that encourages partners within the community, public sector, private sector, and non-governmental sectors to work communally to create better conditions for economic growth and employment generation to improve the locality future and the quality life of all citizens. In addition, Dyosi (2016) affirm that LED is a process whereby both local governments, community-based organisations are responsible for coordinating the use of existing resources and establishing a partnership with one another and with the private sector to stimulate the local economy, thereby improving the lives of local people living in the area. Swinburn, Goga, and Murphy (2006) and Helmsing (2001) believe that LED is a process by which public, business, and non-governmental sectors associates work together to create better conditions for economic growth and employment generation. The next section discusses the perspectives on Local economic development.

## Local Economic Development Perspectives

Arriati and Mihalis (2015:435) believe that local economic development has emerged as a result of complexities encountered by individual municipalities in conceptualising and implementing their plans. Kahika and Karyeija (2017:5) asserts that LED is concerned with the stimulation and development of the well-being and working conditions of the local people by creating of new jobs, retaining the existing jobs, and the generating of income. Meyer (2014) maintains that LED is the answer to an improved quality of life through the decline of unemployment, poverty, and inequality mostly in developing countries. Phago (2005) argues that LED boosts economic development through innovative sustainable business means, such as community self-help and entrepreneurial initiatives. Masuku, Jili, and Selepe (2016) indicate that LED is about local people taking control and responsibility for job-growth and the economic well-being of their communities which results in poverty being reduced.

Helmsing (2001) emphasises that local economic development initiatives mobilise, role players, organisations, resources, and develop the new institutions and local systems through exchange of ideas and strategic actions. Mensah, Domfeh, Ahenkan, and Bawole (2013) assert that LED strategies make economic activities dependent on the specific economic conditions and comparative advantages of a specific geographical area, and generate sustainable jobs in firms more capable to survive changes in the global economic environment. Mensah *et al.*, (2013) state that this results in general improvement in the quality of jobs due to the participation of local stakeholders and the economic activities in the area. Due to the trends in the global environment, Rogerson (2002) is of the view that LED currently requires universal preparation for strategy frameworks that recognises major economic and social development that affects local economies. The following section presents the unemployment and poverty reduction in South Africa, as the main aspects that the nation is dealing with.

## The Importance of Local Economic Development

Ndlovu and Makoni (2014) argue that LED strategies are important tools for development, however, it depends on the context within which they are deployed to address the developmental

challenge. Seduma and Mtapuri (2014) believe that LED is important, as it promotes active participation of local citizens in their own development rather than local citizen being the objects of development. Roche (2018) notes that economic development is a critical factor that drives economic growth in the economy and creates wage jobs and facilitates an improved quality of life. The Greater Giyani Local Municipality LED strategy (2014/2016) postulates that the importance of LED is to build an integrated local economy that opens latent economic development potential and encourages business investment and creates economic development and job opportunities for the poor, in its drive to alleviate poverty. According to Makhubo (2015), the importance of LED is to:

- Fund local employment, empowerment and wealth generation;
- Increase income levels and enable people to pay for services. It also broadens the tax base and revenue base of the local authority;
- Enable the local authority to deliver more and better services to the local communities;
- Provide logical techniques which address the consequences brought by the apartheid government by addressing the socio-economic inequalities and promoting urban integration, job creation and service provision; and
- Directly or indirectly promote economic development and empowerment of community groupings.

### Poverty

The United Nations Development Plan (2017) contends that, 27 million people remain in extreme poverty despite efforts to overallly improve poverty reduction in 1990 across the world. Poverty can be defined as the inability to attain a minimum standard of living, measured in terms of basic consumption needs or income required to satisfy people (Makhubo, 2015). According to Hardman (2013), communities experience life as harsh as a consequence of widespread poverty. Koma (2012) opines that the local government is currently faced with numerous challenges and bottlenecks stemming from high poverty and unemployment rate. Vyas-Doogapersad (2017) argues that there is a growing shift towards formulating development agendas that combine economic growth strategies that are pro-poor, but with more inclination and bias towards poverty alleviation. Mumba and Van Der Waldt (2023) that the successful implementation LED strategies will reduce societal challenges such as unemployment, inequality and poverty that pose severe challenges for South Africa.

The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) (2005) notes that LED is recognised as a key component in the broader efforts to reduce poverty. Wyngaard (2006) maintains that improving distribution and enhancing economic growth should reinforce each other, having a greater impact on poverty reduction. The strategies of LED should therefore include economic growth and the distribution of wealth amongst the communities. Wyngaard (2006) opines that economic growth should be based on a long term-goal, thus and turning to a more equitable distribution of income and economic activity that shares the benefits of growth. On the other hand, UN-Habitat (2005) contends that the actions of the informal economy can help through targeting business expansion aimed at jobs for the poor, targeting the poor as an unskilled labour force for training and placement assistance, and through micro-enterprise programmes.

In the case of TLM, the poverty headcount showed 22.8% in 2001 and 18.9% in 2016 (Thulamela Local Municipality IDP 2017/2018). This indicates that there was an increase in poverty however; the intensity of poverty amounted to 42.2% (2011) and 43.0 % (2016), during the two periods, showing that it has escalated. The attempt to address poverty levels, varying from labour concentrated programmes to supporting rural development community projects that are labour absorbing poverty will be undertaken (Louw & Flandorp, 2017).

## **Unemployment**

Houghton (2016) claims that since many problems are being addressed through LED initiatives, a reduction in unemployment is possible and is the most significant priority in South Africa. Different definitions of unemployment have been provided, ranging from narrow and broader definition. However, this study will use the broader definition of unemployment from, which includes all those without jobs, who would want to work, even if they have not exhibited any research effort in the stipulated period (Poswell, 2002). Stokan (2017) posits that the responsibility of municipalities is to provide adequate supply employments to the community. Due to lack of employment, the LED has a huge role to play to provide for a job with or without any qualifications, and that can be done when LED develop strategies also to cater for those who have not acquired academic qualifications for employment.

Loha (2023) states that LED tackles environmental factors and creating productive citizens to involve in employment opportunities, thus creating jobs. The local municipalities also improve equality, by providing jobs for all citizens. In TLM, unemployment is 14% with weak checks and balances (Thulamela Local Municipality IDP, 2017/2018). The next section provides the methodology and discussion of findings based on the questions posed in the questionnaire and interview schedule from the population and sample drawn from the Thulamela Local Municipality.

## **Local Economic Development and Community Development Projects**

Malele (2018) acknowledges that the aim of LED is to try to solve poverty and unemployment related issues in the communities, mostly poor and underprivileged groups. Malele (2018) further adds that LED strategy initiatives, community development projects were identified as a means towards uplifting, empowering, capacity building, and skills transfer for communities. The Development of Provincial and Local Government (DPLG) (2006) postulates that LED is one of the major functions for local government, it is not the responsibility of the government to create jobs, rather for taking active steps to ensure that the economic and social conditions of the locality are conducive to the creation of employment opportunities. According to Msengana (2014), the main aim of LED is to promote employment creation within different sectors, and in turn improve the lives of the community through utilising the existing human, natural and institutional resources. Local economic development is recognised as a serious approach, within the context of empowered local authorities, proactive actions by local people, and the need to ensure that development is pro-poor in its focus and outcomes (Dunga, 2013). Therefore, LED should be seen in the light of supporting community projects.

Pillay (2010) states that LED is determined by the standard of delivery and output produced by developmental projects. Seanego (2013) contends that LED projects cannot take place without the involvement of community development workers as they have responsibilities and roles to play in the planning and implementation of the projects. With that being said, Tjale (2011) maintains that LED projects can make an effect on job creation, sustainable livelihoods, and social capital amongst project members and the communities. Mtutuzeli (2015) adds that when LED projects are managed and supported well, they can be effective and alleviate poverty in rural areas.

As indicated in Meyer (2007), LED strategies and projects should be outcome-based and focus on job creation and poverty alleviation, economic growth, and skills development. Koma (2012) contends that LED cannot be separated from poverty alleviation projects and programmes initiated and implemented in the municipalities, such as EPWP and provision of free basic services. The LED plays a role in alleviating poverty, through job creation and stimulate local economy using local skills in the local municipalities as a strategy to improve the living conditions of local people.

Meyer (2007) states that the success of any LED project heavily relies on the right allocation of resources, such as funding, skills training, and proper management. Reddy, Sing, and Moodley (2003) postulate that LED is responsible for emerging and empowering environments in which municipalities

can promote economic development. Malemela and Yingi (2016) affirm that the role of LED in developing local economies is to prioritise job creation and poverty alleviation. It also has a role to play in promoting the creation of community development projects. The Greater-Giyani Local Municipality LED strategy (2014/2016) postulates that the importance of LED is to build an integrated local economy that opens latent economic development potential, and encourages business investment, and creates economic development and job opportunities for the poor in its drive to alleviate poverty. Aganang Local Municipality (2013) adds that LED investigates options and opportunities accessible to expand the local economic base of the area, to address the creation of job opportunities and turn of effects throughout the local economy. In addition, Aduku (2018) asserts that the importance of LED is seen through decentralisation, whereby studies on development planning issues such as economic and social are undertaken. Feasible studies are crucial to be always be up to date with the strategies that can be adopted to effectively plan and implement local economy.

## **The Role of Local Government in Local Economic Development**

According to Mihalis and Ariati (2015:435), LED is viewed as a critical approach to pursue in South Africa in the hands of local authorities. Pro-active actions by local citizens, and the need to ensure that development in pro-poor is a focus and outcomes of LED. McQuaid (1993) states that local officials' role can be perceived by their responsibilities, as democratically voted bodies, for the social and economic well-being of the entire community and the knowledge of local needs and opportunities. Shannon (2018) also maintains that the municipal council can lead a community planning process, wherein they act as the lead partner to be responsible for deciding for community planning in their areas. McQuaid (1993:105) contends that the policies of economic development are carried out by the local authorities and activities to execute them are very different. The local government policies should be aimed at addressing the issues of local economic development

Masuku *et al.*, (2016) opine that local government officials can assist the community through the creation of small businesses, including poultry, catering, and sewing industries. Shangase (2017) affirms that local government is at the forefront of the campaign to create a sustainable local economy. Shangase (2017) further states that it can do so through working with the district, metros, local municipalities, and wards, to provide the necessary leadership and to ensure that the process runs smoothly. The United Cities and Local Government (UCLG) (2016) states that the municipalities have the power for physical infrastructure, roads, water supply, waste management, information and communication technologies, all of which are fundamentals to economic activity. The National Framework for Local Economic Development (2018/2020) asserts that municipalities should develop communication strategies, as a broad-based municipal function, to facilitate commitment for its implementation across municipal structures and departments.

Municipalities should also address the needs of the citizens for public health, education, housing, skilled reliable workforce, cultural and recreational facilities which also form part of community development. With regards to the above-mentioned services, Jimu (2008) regards them as outcomes of community development. Local government plays the following role in local economic development: co-ordination, facilitation, entrepreneurship, and development. The roles are discussed next.

According to Nthekeleng (2014), the municipality acts as a co-ordinating body on the LED. Meyer (2014) adds that government leaders are expected to take the lead in coordination, and other leaders from the community and business must contribute. Zulu and Mubangizi (2014) affirm that the important tool of coordinating is through the IDP, which draws organised developmental objectives, priorities, strategies, and programmes of the municipality. Zulu and Mubangizi (2014) contend that the municipality should encourage active participation of all stakeholders in the development of rural LED policy and its implementation in the interest of job creation for rural women and youth. Makhubo (2015) adds that local government as a facilitator of LED is capacitated and transformed to play a developmental

role in a remarkable South African formation. Meyer (2014) add that a municipality should facilitate the establishment of a community organisations forum for the region, including all NGO's to support community projects. Sibanda (2013) states that local government is responsible for facilitating strategic local economic development/ SMME partnership as well as LED/SMME delivery strategy across municipalities.

Mashamaite and Lethoko (2018) affirm that local governments should also play a role with regard to the establishment of more private enterprises and a highly important function in terms of economic development, most appropriate to the local authority. Mokoeana (2019) asserts that municipalities encourage entrepreneurship SMMEs through campaigns, leadership training and awards, strengthening the enabling environment through flexible regulations, as well as better access to finance and markets. Msinga Local Municipality LED Strategy (2012) adds that municipalities provide business support services and capacity building and training for local communities and entrepreneurs.

### ***Methodology***

The research adopted pragmatic paradigm. Khan (2014:) points out that pragmatic paradigm means understanding the realities of a situation and making decisions based on a thorough research. The study used the Mixed Research Method (MRM), a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Regnault, Willgoss and Barbic (2018) define MMR the application of a well-defined and pre-specified design that articulates purposely and prospectively, qualitative and quantitative components, to produce a combined set of evidence addressing a single research question.

### ***Data Collection Methods***

Institutional approval from the Thulamela Local Municipality to recruit participants and respondents for the purpose of the study was obtained. Data was collected using triangulation, in triangulation data is collected through written questionnaires and interviews with partakers (Patil, 2014). Data was collected using structured closed-ended questionnaires and open-ended structured interviews with total (ten) 10 participants. Structured closed-ended-questionnaire provides respondents with various answers to choose from, as they consist of a Likert scale that consist of 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'not sure', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'. The respondents who were given questionnaire totalled to 110 respondents. Questions were the ones that are related to the study in order to guide the interview in collecting data. Data was collected simultaneously through questionnaires and face to face interview with participants simultaneously, as the study used two separate sample size to collect qualitative and quantitative data. The participants were recruited through email and face to face in the Department, others telephone calls and emails for their availability. The aspect of consent was obtained from the participants.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data was analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. According to Onwuegbuzie and Combs (2011), mixed method data analysis involves the use of both quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques within the same framework. Descriptive statistics was adopted to analyse data collected through questionnaires. The use of Data International Business Machine (IBM): Statistical and Product Service Solutions (SPSS 25.0) computer software was adopted. Data is presented through graphs, tables, percentages and frequencies followed by analysis and interpretation. The data collected through interviews was analysed using thematic analysis form. The study used Atlas.Ti to analyse thematic data. The study followed Braun and Clarke steps when analysing data: familiarizing yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and

producing the report. This section first presents the data collected through questionnaires, which is shown by the table, while the second part presents findings collected through interviews.

### **Study Area**

The study was conducted in the Thulamela Local Municipality. It consisted of selected community members and officials under the jurisdiction of TLM. Thulamela Local Municipality is the second largest of all local municipalities in terms of population in Limpopo Province. The population size in 2016 was 497137 (Thulamela Local Municipality IDP, 2018/2019). There were 721 personnel as of 2016/2017 in TLM. The study involved selected participants and respondents; namely: municipal manager, mayor, IDP staff members, LED staff members, public participation staff members, ward councillors, community development workers, civic chairpersons, traditional leaders, and selected community members above the age of 18 years.

### **Sampling**

The study was conducted using probability and non-probability sampling. Purposive sampling, where the participants do not have the same chance of being selected was used to select participants who are qualified, knowledgeable, and skilled and experience in order to gather more information from participants regarding their perspectives on the importance of Local economic development as a strategy to enhance community development projects in the Thulamela Local Municipality. Non-probability samplings was used to select respondents for data collected through close-ended questionnaires, as the population was high and to give respondents the same chance of being in the study. Purposive sampling, consisted on ten (10) participants, while random consisted of (100) respondents.

The table below shows the number of participants:

Table 1: Sample

<b>Group of stakeholders</b>	<b>Sample size</b>
Municipal manager	1
Municipal mayor	1
Local economic development staff	5
Integrated development plan staff	5
Public participation staff	5
Ward councillors	10
Traditional leaders	15
Community development workers	10
Civic chairpersons	10
Selected community members	48
<b>Total</b>	<b>110</b>

The profile of the research participants included the internal and external stakeholders involved in LED, namely; municipal officials and community members. The sample size is large in order to meet the



objective of the study. The above sample shows a total of 110 participants, the sample was divided into two parts whereby, 100 respondents were used to collect quantitative data using questionnaires, while 10 participants were used in collecting qualitative data through interviews. The first section provides total response based on data collected through questionnaires.

### Findings

Table 2: Response Rate

Number of interviewees	Actual	Responses
100	100	100

### Demographics of the Respondents

Based on the overall, 100 respondents of whom 66% were males (n=66/100) and 34% were females (n=34/100) the response rate was 100% (100/100). The age of respondents varied from less than 30 to 61-above, of which 16% were less than (n=16/100) while 21%(n=21/100) were between 31-40 years, 37% (n=37/100) were between 41-50 years of age, while 20% (n=20/100) were at the age of 51-60, and lastly 6% (n=6/100) were 61 years and above.

Of 100 respondents who were part of the study, 47% (n=47/100) of the respondents were taken from the communities, as the most beneficiaries of the community projects. The other 9% (n=9/100) were taken from the traditional leaders, and the next 5% (n=5/100) were chosen from the ward committee as they also had an understanding and information with regard to LED. The other 9% (n=9/100) indicates the respondents from the civic organisation, while 9% (n=9/100) were the municipal officials, and the remaining 10% (n=10/100) shows that community development member, on the other hand, 1% (n=1/100) as the municipal manager and the last 1% (n=1/100) municipal mayor. The rationale of choosing those participants was to ensure that information is gathered from people who have an understanding of LED.

The study also determined the academic qualifications of the respondents and participants, the results shows that only 10% (n=10/100) of participants did not have grade 12, while 16% (n=16/100) had grade 12 and 16% (n=16/100) holds a certificate. The majority of respondents which were 36% (n=36/100) had diploma/ degree, whereas 13% (n=13/100) had a B-Tech/ Honour's degree. The second last 6% (n=6/100) of participants had M-Tech/ Master's while the remaining 3% (3/100) had a Doctorate. This affirms that the majority of participants are knowledgeable, and are able to read and understand the objective of the research and information provided to them. Thus making them to respond in a way that reflects truth with regard to their understanding of LED.

Seventy four percent (n=74/100) of the respondents were Venda speaking while 22% (n=22/100) spoke Tsonga and the remaining 4% (n=4/100) were Sepedi speaking group.

The target number of respondents was achieved because all the respondents were available to provide the answers. The respondents were required to complete a self-administered questionnaire, which consisted of five close-ended questions. This section provides analysis of the respondents' views and perception regarding LED as a strategy to enhance community development projects in the TLM.

This section provides the data collected through research questionnaire. All (100) distributed research questionnaires were returned by respondents. Local Economic Development is a strategy for improving community development projects. This sub-section presents the data on the importance local

economic development as a strategy to enhance community development projects in Thulamela Local Municipality. The information will be presented with frequencies and percentages followed by a synthesis of information.

Table 3. Local economic Development as a strategy to enhance community development projects in Thulamela Local Municipality

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Not Sure		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Total %
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Local Economic Development is a strategy for improving community development projects.	37	37	55	55	6	6	2	2	0	0	100
Local Economic Developments can alleviate poverty.	32	32	54	54	12	12	1	1	2	2	100
Local economic development can create job opportunities.	50	50	42	42	7	7	1	1	0	0	100
LED provides regular training to project coordinators.	13	13	30	30	27	27	26	26	4	4	100
Municipality has a clear channel of communication with regard to the LED projects.	12	12	26	26	26	26	26	26	10	10	100

### Local Economic Development Is a Strategy for Improving Community Development Projects

Table 3, shows that From the 100 respondents who took part in the study, 55% (n=55/100) agreed with the idea that LED is a strategy for improving community development projects, while 2% (n=2/100) disagreed with the statement. There were 6% (n=6/100) who were not sure as whether LED is a strategy for improving community development projects or not. Thirty-seven percent (n=37/100), strongly agreed that LED is a strategy for improving community development projects. These research findings support the notion that the Municipality uses LED as a strategy to enhance community development projects. The strategy is planned in such a way that its objectives are aligned to community projects.

### Local Economic Developments Can Alleviate Poverty

As shown above in table 3, and based on the 100 respondents who were part of the study, 32% (n=32/100) strongly agreed, that local economic development can alleviate poverty, while 02 (2%) disagreed with the statement. However, 12% (n=12/100) indicated that they were not sure as to whether LED can alleviate poverty or not. The majority, 54% (n=54/100) agreed with the statement, while the remainder 1% (n=1/100), strongly disagreed. Respondents believed that poverty reduction is essential for any community, and there was a need for LED to be adopted. The results show that there are differences

in the views of respondents but based on the majority of 54% (n=54/100) LED is accepted to be a strategy to create jobs. This is supported by the findings of Mumba and Van Der Waldt (2023) that the successful implementation LED strategies will reduce societal challenges such as unemployment, inequality and poverty that pose severe challenges for South Africa.

### **Local economic Development Can Create Job Opportunities**

From the 100 respondents as indicated above in table 3, the majority 50% (n=50/100) strongly agreed that local economic development can create job opportunities, and there were no respondents who strongly disagreed. On the other hand, 7% (n=7/100) were not sure as to whether LED can create job opportunities. However, 42% (n=42/100) agreed with the statement. The results showed that only 1% (n=1/100) respondent disagreed. The results also indicated that there is a correlation, as per those who strongly agreed: 50% and agreed 42% with the given statement. Moreover, there is a clear consensus on the significance of LED as a job creation strategy, based on the majority of respondents on the statement. It can be affirmed that the LED strategy can create job opportunities as indicated by the high numbers who agreed with the statement. This is supported by the findings of Loha (2023) that LED tackles environmental factors and creating productive citizens to involve in employment opportunities, thus creating jobs.

### **Local Economic Development Provides Regular Training to Project Coordinators**

The 100 respondents were asked whether LED provides regular training to project coordinators. The responses indicate that few, 13% (n=13/100), strongly agreed that LED provides regular training to project coordinators. As shown in the table above, 4% (n=4/100) strongly disagreed with the statement. On the one hand, 26 (26%) were not sure as to whether the Municipality provides regular training to project coordinators or not. This could be because that training is being provided to some stakeholders not everyone. The majority of 30% (n=30/100), agreed with the idea, while 26% (n=26/100) disagreed. The results also indicate that there is a negative relationship based on the responses of those who disagreed 26% and strongly disagreed 4% with regard to training. Kgobe, Mabeba, and Mamokhere (2023) support the findings that the active participation of the public in the planning processes can significantly improve the effective execution of community-focused initiatives, such as LED programs.

### **Municipality Has A Clear Channel of Communication with Regard to the LED Projects**

As shown in table 1 above, 12% (n=12/100) strongly agreed that the Municipality has a clear channel of communication with regard to LED projects. However, 10% (n=10/100) strongly disagreed with the statement. Furthermore, there is 26% (n=26/100) of the respondents who were not sure as to whether the Municipality has clear communication with regard to LED projects or not. On the other hand, 26% (n=26/100) of the respondents agreed with the statement. In addition, 26% (n=26/100) disagreed with the statement. The important part of LED is to ensure that all the involved stakeholders must understand and have the necessary information regarding LED, including the way it is communicated. Based on the results, it is clear that there is no clear relationship. The results also show that communication is not as clear as it is supposed to be.

This implies that the Municipality needs to find a way in which communication is strengthened for better effectiveness of LED through ways such as *Imbizos*, newsletters and even social media platforms. It can simply be stated out that there is lack of clear communication. This is supported by the National Framework for Local Economic Development (2018) asserts that municipalities should develop communication strategies, as a broad-based municipal function, to facilitate commitment for its implementation across municipal structures and departments.

## **Data Collected from the Interviews**

This section provides data collected through interviews. After presentation, data will be analysed and interpreted. However, the interview schedule was different from the questionnaire, yet still representing the same research objectives. Structured interviews schedule was conducted with 10 respondents. It included three LED officials, two IDP officials, one traditional leader, one civic organisation committee member, one ward councillor, one public participation officer and one ordinary community member involved in community projects. Participants were asked questions which was followed by their explanations during the interview. Their responses were grouped into themes to find the similarities.

### **Summary of themes**

### **Explanation from interviews.**

#### **Poverty**

It was indicated that local economic development is vital fighting poverty, since this will reduce rate of unemployment. The further revealed that poverty alleviation through job creation and food security. The participant revealed that it is to reduce poverty for poor and vulnerable groups. It was revealed that it will also be vital in investment opportunities through incentives packages which results in poverty reduction for local people. It was further revealed that LED results in reduced crime and hunger.

#### **Unemployment**

When the replying to the question, the participant mentioned that it is important as it will help in the reduction of unemployment through self-employment. Participants further, affirmed that LED will help to reduce the rate of unemployment. Results revealed that it ensures that citizens fight unemployment and communities are part of their own development. Results further reveal that LED will reduce the rate of unemployment challenging the country. Unemployed youth will have the opportunity to be employed.

#### **Job Creation**

The findings reveals that local economic development important in the creation of jobs. The findings indicate that LED will provide job absorption for communities. The results found that led creates temporal and permanent jobs and assists families with low income. It was revealed that it is important to create jobs through starting jobs and factories which will result in reducing poverty and create income opportunities for poor citizens, this will stimulate local economy. It was probed that it curbs joblessness and crime. It was revealed that LED is important in ensuring that citizens have jobs and communities are part of their own development. It was further probed by the participant that it is important for job creation, good relationship amongst communities through engagement.

#### **Local Economy**

When responding of the question, the participant stated that LED is important to stimulate local economy. It was further revealed that it is also vital to plan and identify appropriate avenues for local economy development. It was furthermore attested that it is vital for business opportunities thus important for local economy, this will require funding. The results shows that LED will accelerate shared and inclusive economy: promotion of space economy. It creates local economic spanner to local communities and it promotes small scale entrepreneur to grow and it promotes sound cohesiveness. Local resources such as land and local skills can be used to benefit all individuals an important assets for local economy. LED be used to encourage youth/people to start businesses through SMMEs to stimulate local economy.

## **Skills**

With regard to the question asked, results indicate that it is vital for the implementation of projects that helps to impart necessary skills and training for local people. Results revealed that that stakeholders can gain skills, training and education from LED projects. Local skills can be transferred amongst participants. The results further show that community members are well trained by being involved in LED projects. It was further revealed that citizens gain education and researches are conducted from LED projects, thus acquiring various skills necessary for development. The study also showed that LED can be used to improve skills through training and capacity building. This implies that feasible study of projects

## ***Limitation of the Study***

The study sampled a group of employees from the Thulamela Local Municipality of the entire population. Future research is highly recommended for this topic, based on its impact when implemented effectively. The researcher was faced with a challenge of obtaining an approval letter to collect data, which took longer time than anticipated, however, it was eventually provided. Also the challenge was making appointment with the participant, others were too commutated or cancel in the last minutes, yet it did not affect the objective of the study, as in the end data was collected effectively.

## ***Discussion of the Major Findings***

The aim of the study was to examine the importance of local economic development as a strategy to enhance community development projects. On the basis of this aim data was collected with the group sampled from the population. The results showed that that LED is a driver to addressing the challenge of unemployment, poverty and stimulate local economy. This is in line with the findings of Ntetha (2021) that correlates the findings that that local economic development interventions contributed to addressing unemployment and poverty.

The study's findings show a significant relationship between local economic development and community development projects. This implies that as the complexity of poverty and unemployment grows, so does the ability to support more projects aimed at promoting local economic development. This is consistent with Malele's (2018) findings, which show that the goal of LED is to try to solve poverty and unemployment-related issues in communities, primarily among the poor and underprivileged.

The findings also revealed that LED can be used to encourage youth/people to start businesses via SMMEs. Enaigoghe and Ramsuraj's (2023) findings support the notion that entrepreneurs and SMEs are important drivers of local development. Young entrepreneurs can receive assistance from the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA).

The analysis predicts that local economic development will have a significant impact on community development projects by reducing poverty, creating jobs, increasing income, and developing skills. These findings supplement the previous findings in some studies that suggest that LED investigates options and opportunities available to expand the local economic base of the area, to address the creation of job opportunities and the turn of effects throughout the local economy (Aganang Local Municipality, 2013).

The results show that local resources such as land and local skills can be used in LED to promote local economy. The study also showed that LED can be used to improve skills through training and capacity building. This is similar to the findings of, OECD (2022) which suggests using available skillsets to smooth workers' transitions into jobs that require little reskilling and leveraging local assets or existing comparative advantages to reduce adjustment costs. Furthermore, the study demonstrated that LED can be

achieved through the funding of community projects. This is consistent with previous findings by Ababio and Meyer (2012), who suggest that the national government should provide broad policy and principles, as well as funding for strategies and projects, to enable local governments to implement LED projects.

It was also discovered that LED as a strategy can improve LED through training and guidance in community projects, increase public participation/community involvement in development, and engage all stakeholders in actively participating in community-development projects. However, Kanayo, Ndlovu, Agholor (2021) raise some important aspects that points from the literature indicate that Local Economic Development is not providing enough for its communities. There are programs in place to reduce poverty and employment, but they are insufficient and do not serve the entire community.

The study also found that LED can be used to improve community development projects by creating a favorable environment for starting and growing businesses, as well as providing funding to emerging businesses. Chomane and Biljohn (2023) findings support the results by stating that these businesses will play an important role in a municipality's LED strategy by contributing to the program and project outcomes, in addition to developing and sustaining relationships and partnerships with communities based on their needs, preferences, and contributions to meeting their LED needs.

It was revealed that LED projects, as well as feasibility studies, are critical to stimulating growth, the local economy, and partnerships. According to Ngumbela's (2023) findings, LED enables the government, private sector, non-profit organizations, and local community to work together to strengthen the local economy.

The findings provide insights for the local, municipal, and national governments responsible for implementing the LED strategy. One could argue that the obvious practical implication of this study is that it proposes implementing LED projects in communities before they fall into deep poverty, unemployment, inequalities, and a lack of skills, which will positively result in income generation, necessitating the formation of partnerships between municipalities. Enaifoghe and Ramsuraj (2023) findings relates that a strong partnership between the public and private sectors is required to promote economic growth and community development, expand the market for job creation, and reduce poverty.

## ***Recommendations***

- The Municipality must ensure that the LED strategy plans are implemented on time and with the goal of meeting the society's economic and social needs. This could lead to job creation and poverty reduction, as well as stimulating the local economy, increasing income, and reducing community inequality.
- The LED is not a one-man show; the municipality should collaborate with the private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based development, and other key stakeholders. This means that LED can be used to foster a business environment in a newly developed area, allowing for the development of new community projects in conjunction with other stakeholders.
- Utilize local skills, resources, and land to support communities through training, education, skill transfer, and facilitation. This is supported by the finding of OECD (2022) who suggests that governments should promote adult learning and active labor market policies based on skill evaluation and anticipation systems. This necessitates active participation by municipal officials, employers, and public actors, as well as targeted measures to address the uneven risk of job loss across regions, industries, and individuals.
- The municipality must also provide assistance to emerging businesses, such as funding and information based on business criteria, as well as SMMEs, in order to maintain local projects. This will also benefit the local economy by generating income.

- It is believed that by supporting Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) locally, Black Africans will learn to support other black businesses on their own. It is suggested that many Africans should buy from their counterparts and support locally produced goods and services, as some do not buy products from other black people but rather from Indian shops.
- Effective LED implementation requires officials to possess relevant skills, including problem-solving, leadership, management, communication, and organizational abilities.
- To promote local economic development, the municipality must collaborate with traditional leaders who own the majority of the land. Traditional leaders should also be willing to collaborate with their communities to use the land for projects that benefit everyone. The municipality must prioritise tourism, agriculture, manufacturing, and commercial activities.

It is important to note that planning is important, as is budgeting and implementation, and that LED represents the plan of community development projects that are included in the LED strategy. The municipality should plan ahead for LED.

## **Conclusions**

As a result of high unemployment rate, poverty, low income, and inequality, low level of skills the country is faced with, failure to implement LED strategy, the country is yet to have a huge impact on the local economy. However, this issue can be addressed by ensuring that LED projects are developed and implemented thus addressing the issues of joblessness and eradicate poverty. The findings on this study indicate that local economic development play a pivotal role in the community projects when implemented effectively as it results in poverty alleviation, reduce the unemployment and contribute to the local economy. This is supported by the Greater-Giyani Local Municipality LED strategy (2014/2016) that the importance of LED is to build an integrated local economy that opens latent economic development potential, and encourages business investment, and creates economic development and job opportunities for the poor in its drive to alleviate poverty.

South African Statistics indicate that unemployment resulted in an increase of 0, 8% in the unemployment rate to 32, 9% in first quarter of 2024, while about 13.2 million people in South Africa are living in extreme poverty, with the poverty threshold at 2.15 U.S. dollars daily as of 2024. This implies that 139,563 additional people were pushed into poverty equated to 2023, thus resulting in inequality. This implies that, in order to address socioeconomic issues, the municipality must form partnerships with the private sector to develop, fund, and create a conducive environment for entrepreneurship, as well as use local resources and skills to implement local projects that will result in developed communities.

This study adopted the local milieu theoretical framework; one can argue that the use of local resources, partnerships, and skills will promote the effectiveness, efficiency, and economic aspects of the community while having a positive impact on the general welfare of the society. The study shares the insight on policy makers in the Thulamela Municipality to ensure effective and efficient implementation of community development projects.

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