

Inclusive Development Programmes for Reducing Youth Unemployment in Rural Municipalities

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Abstract

Redressing the social and economic ills bedevilling rural municipalities has not been an easy task for the South African government. Although programmes such as the Youth Employment Service (YES) were channelled into local government, youth unemployment is still a daunting challenge that leads to youth poverty and marginalisation. This study explores the level of inclusivity and accessibility of existing youth development programmes by the youths in the Eastern Cape Province. Exploring key issues such as youth exclusion and barriers to participation, this study sheds light on the complex dynamics underlying youth unemployment in the Eastern Cape. The study utilised a systematic literature review analysis. Articles for review were accessed from the Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Science Direct databases. The review indicated numerous challenges of rural development programmes in reducing youth unemployment. These include a lack of inclusivity in empowerment programmes, negative attitudes and minimal participation of youth, limited funding to support youth start-ups and other entrepreneurship ventures, including minimal stakeholder intervention in transforming young lives. Further, we found that some youths had little desire to participate in youth development programmes due to poor information dissemination owing to poor access to modern digital technologies, leading to their exclusion from the programmes. The study contributes to the body of knowledge on youth development in rural municipalities. This is one of the areas of concern for efforts to reduce unemployment in South African rural provinces in line with the National Development Plan Vision 2030 in South Africa.

Keywords: Youth unemployment, Inclusive youth development programs, Socio-economic disparities, Marginalised communities

1 Introduction

Youth development is a topical agenda of many public administrations across the globe as governments and international organisations increasingly prioritise policies and initiatives aimed at fostering youth employment, skills development, and social inclusion (Canton, 2021; Tshilunda et al., 2022; World Bank Group, 2023). Nevertheless, empowering youth from rural backgrounds has been a complex task associated with existing socioeconomic ills, limited skills and, in most cases, an uncondusive economic environment that offers limited employment opportunities for the youth (Latiff et al., 2023). This phenomenon has also impacted various African central and local governments, where rural youth face significant employment challenges (African Development Bank, 2016; Dasgupta, 2022). As a result, many young people become discouraged job seekers and lose trust in their governments as unemployment continues to rise with little hope of labour market absorption (Fox & Filmer, 2019). In this study, the term 'youth' refers to individuals aged 15 to 34, consistent with the definition used by the National Youth Policy of South Africa (2015).

Redressing the social and economic ills bedevilling rural municipalities has not been an easy task for the South African government. Although programmes such as the Youth Employment Service (YES) were channelled into local government, youth unemployment is still a daunting challenge that triggers youth poverty and marginalisation. As of the third quarter of 2024, South Africa's official unemployment rate was 32.1%, with youth unemployment (ages 15-24) at 45.5% (South African Government, 2024). In the Eastern

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Cape, the situation is more severe, with an overall unemployment rate of 39.7% and youth unemployment (ages 15-34) at 52.4% in the second quarter of 2023 (Eastern Cape Socio-Economic Consultative Council, 2023). These statistics indicate that South Africa continues to face high unemployment rates among young people, especially in rural areas where job opportunities are often limited.

Notwithstanding several development endeavours, the problem persists and impacts the socio-economic environment of these regions (Dlamini, 2020). Over the years, several youth development programmes have been implemented to tackle this problem and enable young individuals to join the dynamic and somewhat stringent labour force. The programmes include several interventions, such as vocational training initiatives, entrepreneurial programmes, job placement services, skills development workshops, and mentorship schemes (Sinclair et al., 2021). Nevertheless, these initiatives encounter significant gaps and limitations, such as a lack of alignment with local economic demands, limited availability of resources and support services, regulatory constraints, and barriers to employment (Mohammed-Shuker & Hashim-Sadik, 2024).

As observed by Lange et al. (2020), many vocational training programmes do not equip participants with the skills required by the labour market and fail to address transportation obstacles. Similarly, entrepreneurship initiatives face challenges in accessing financing and market networks (Sambo, 2016; Van-Rhyn, 2023). Job placement services and skills development workshops often fail to address the structural barriers that hinder success while providing training that may not be relevant to current market demands (Botha et al., 2023). Similarly, mentorship programmes may have limited impact and reach, especially in rural areas (Keeler et al., 2018). As a result, there has been a growing concern about the effectiveness and inclusivity of these initiatives, as they have failed to adequately address the complex challenges of youth unemployment in rural areas. This discourse highlights the significance of inclusivity in development programmes, acknowledging the necessity of customising interventions to address the specific challenges encountered by youth in rural municipalities (Accord, 2020; Geza et al., 2022; Hlungwani, 2020; Udeh et al., 2023). However, preliminary assessments such as those by Mazwi (2020) and the National Youth Development Agency (2020) indicate that current initiatives frequently do not effectively reach marginalised youth populations in these regions. The issue is worsened by the absence of targeted interventions, resource limitations, and policy implementation challenges.

Fragmentation and lack of coordination among stakeholders such as local municipalities, national departments (e.g., Department of Employment and Labour, Department of Higher Education and Training), development agencies like the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA), and civil society organisations hinders the scalability and effectiveness of interventions, leading to the perpetuation of socio-economic inequalities in rural areas (Mhlongo, 2016). Considering this context, this paper evaluates the level of inclusivity in development programmes that focus on addressing youth unemployment in the Alfred Nzo District Municipality. Inclusivity is a central issue in these programmes, as many youths, particularly those from marginalised communities, are not being reached effectively. The specific objectives of this study are to:

- *Assess the extent to which existing youth development programmes are inclusive and accessible to marginalised youth in the Alfred Nzo District Municipality;*
- *Identify the key barriers that hinder youth participation in these development programmes; and*
- *Explore targeted strategies and policy interventions that can enhance inclusivity and improve the effectiveness of youth development initiatives.*

By addressing these gaps, the paper provides insights and recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of youth development programmes in rural municipalities, ultimately contributing to the broader objective of reducing youth unemployment in South Africa's rural areas. The study seeks to influence policy and practice in the broader area of youth empowerment in public administration while advocating for a sustainable economic and social development model for curbing youth marginalisation in rural municipalities of South Africa. The paper is structured as follows: It begins with an overview of the theoretical framework underpinning the study, namely Human Capital Theory. This is followed by a literature review that examines

the various youth development programmes relevant to rural municipalities. The methodology section outlines the systematic literature review approach employed. The discussion section presents the key findings on the barriers to inclusivity in youth development programmes within the Alfred Nzo District Municipality. Finally, the paper concludes with recommendations aimed at enhancing the effectiveness and inclusivity of such programmes in rural South Africa.

2 Theoretical framework: Human Capital Theory

The notion of human capital highlights the need to invest in education and skills to enhance future career prospects. Early childhood and youth development are essential for creating human capital (Abbas et al., 2022). Within educational organisations, youth communities are seen as crucial catalysts for human capital development. Their primary objective is to execute efficient strategies for youth policy and socio-economic advancement (White, 2021). According to Abbas et al. (2022), Human Capital Theory highlights the need to foster youth development to achieve long-term benefits, promote economic growth, and build social capital. Investing in the abilities and talents of young people at an early stage is essential for achieving success in the future. Thus, investing in youth development and education aligns with the human capital theory, which seeks to nurture skilled individuals for future economic production and societal well-being. Within the framework of youth development programmes, this theory posits that providing young individuals with pertinent skills and information could boost their potential for securing employment and improving their economic opportunities (Almendarez, 2011). These programmes seek to tackle unemployment by enhancing the human capital of young people, making them more appealing to potential employers.

3 Literature review

This section discusses the various types of youth development programmes that can be used to attain inclusive youth development in rural municipalities.

3.1 *Technical and vocational education and training initiatives*

Vocational training initiatives aim to provide young individuals with the necessary skills and qualifications to enter the workforce or pursue careers in various trades and industries (Udeh et al., 2023). These programmes frequently provide practical training, apprenticeships, and certification in various fields, including plumbing, carpentry, electrical work, and automotive repair (Ismail & Mujuru, 2020). Although vocational training initiatives have succeeded in equipping certain youth with practical skills and enhancing their employability, they are not without limitations. A study conducted by Msibi (2021) revealed that the skills training provided by technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutes does not meet the necessary standards and lacks alignment with the demands of the job market. In addition, it is worth noting that these institutions frequently encounter issues with inadequate resources, infrastructure, and the recruitment of qualified staff (Andreoni, 2018; Leyaro & Joseph, 2019). Literature indicates that TVET and apprenticeships are limited, making them inaccessible to a wide range of individuals (Filmer & Fox, 2014; Sorensen et al., 2017). Furthermore, Adams et al. (2013) and Sorensen et al. (2017) indicate that individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds or with limited educational attainment are less inclined to pursue vocational education and training (TVET) or engage in informal apprenticeships. Workplace-based learning opportunities are more abundant in urban areas, whereas young individuals in rural areas primarily depend on agricultural work (Ayele et al., 2018). In their study, Cuaulte-Segovia and Costa-Checa (2021) highlight the potential challenges vocational training programmes face in keeping up with technological advancements and changing industry trends. These challenges may hinder the programmes' ability to adequately prepare young individuals for the demands of the contemporary workforce.

3.2 *Job placement services*

Job placement services strive to connect young individuals with employment opportunities through job matching, résumé support, interview training, and networking assistance (NYDA, 2020). These services facilitate smoother transitions into the workforce by bridging the gap between job seekers and employers (Eseadi, 2024). While such services have yielded some success in placing youth into jobs, their overall effectiveness remains limited, particularly in rural municipalities. As Mazwi (2020) observes, the scarcity of employment opportunities in rural regions, especially within low-demand or seasonal sectors, undermines the potential impact of these services. This limitation suggests that job placement alone cannot resolve the structural employment challenges faced by rural youth. Instead, such initiatives need to be integrated into broader development strategies that consider local labour market realities and the persistent barriers to sustainable employment.

3.3 *Skills development workshops*

Skills development workshops provide young individuals with opportunities to acquire a broad range of soft skills, technical competencies, and personal development attributes essential for workplace success (Ishak et al., 2023). These workshops often cover areas such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, time management and financial literacy, all of which are critical for improving employability (Ramos-Monge et al., 2023). While the potential benefits of such programmes are widely acknowledged, particularly in enhancing youth confidence and self-esteem, there are notable limitations in their implementation. Habiyaemye et al. (2022) highlight that many of these initiatives in rural South Africa suffer from poor sustainability, primarily due to inadequate follow-up mechanisms and reinforcement activities. Without ongoing support, the practical application of acquired skills becomes difficult, ultimately limiting the long-term impact of these interventions on youth livelihoods.

3.4 *Mentorship schemes*

Mentorship schemes connect young individuals with experienced professionals or community leaders who offer guidance, advice, and support as they navigate their educational and career paths (Dube & Nicholson, 2018). Mentorship relationships are beneficial for young individuals, as they provide opportunities to develop networks, gain valuable insights into various career options, and enhance confidence in their abilities (St-Jean & Audet, 2012). A study conducted by Martin et al. (2021) revealed that mentorship programmes in rural municipalities face challenges due to the scarcity of mentors, especially in specific fields or industries. A study by Garringer et al. (2017) revealed that mentoring in rural communities faces a significant obstacle in terms of funding for programme implementation and sustainability. The budget allocated for rural mentoring programmes is considerably lower than that of urban mentoring programmes. The study revealed that many rural mentoring programmes face difficulties in providing services due to geographic isolation. These challenges include transportation issues, limited mentoring activity options, and fundraising obstacles, all hindering their efforts to reach more young people (Garringer et al., 2017). In addition, several challenges need to be addressed. These include limited access to services and resources, difficulties in recruiting and retaining mentors, the need to identify meaningful and diverse mentor-mentee activities, transportation challenges due to the vastness of rural communities and the distance between mentors and mentees, as well as financial constraints (Aschenbrener & Edwards, 2023).

3.5 *Entrepreneurship programs*

Entrepreneurship programmes are designed to cultivate entrepreneurial skills and inspire young individuals to pursue self-employment or establish their ventures. These initiatives typically include training in business planning, financial management, marketing and networking, along with access to vital resources such as financing and mentorship support (Cho, 2015; Galvao et al., 2020). While these programmes hold considerable potential to empower youth and drive local economic development, their effectiveness, particularly in rural

settings, is often constrained. Agemas and Wondimagegnu (2020) highlight that limited access to financing and markets, coupled with regulatory barriers, poses significant challenges to entrepreneurship in rural areas. In many cases, restricted credit access prevents young people from translating entrepreneurial training into viable business ventures. These limitations suggest that although entrepreneurship programmes offer a promising avenue for addressing youth unemployment, their impact remains uneven and highly dependent on contextual enablers that are frequently lacking in rural municipalities.

4 State of inclusivity in rural youth development programmes: Case of Alfred Nzo District Municipality

This section discusses factors affecting levels of inclusivity in rural youth development programmes based on Alfred Nzo District in the Eastern Cape as a case study.

4.1 Access and participation

Youth development programmes are designed not only to foster skill development and entrepreneurship but also to promote gender equality and facilitate active youth participation in decision-making processes. However, research consistently highlights several barriers that hinder the participation of specific demographic groups, particularly in rural contexts. These barriers include limited access to education and training opportunities, inadequate transportation infrastructure, and cultural or societal norms that discourage youth engagement, especially among women and marginalised communities (Alla-Mensah et al., 2021; Şerban & Brazienè, 2021; Tele, 2017). Digital exclusion poses another significant challenge, as many young people lack reliable internet access or digital devices, which are increasingly essential for participating in modern development initiatives (Escamilla & Lonean, 2023). Addressing these barriers requires coordinated action from both state and non-state actors to improve access to digital tools, data, and skills. As Şerban and Brazienè (2021) argue, ensuring equitable access to these resources is critical to enabling all youth, regardless of location or background, to benefit meaningfully from development programmes.

4.2 Tailored interventions

Tailoring development programmes to the specific needs and conditions of diverse youth populations is essential for achieving genuine inclusion. Research shows that generic, one-size-fits-all approaches often fail to address the nuanced challenges faced by young people, particularly those in rural settings such as the Alfred Nzo District Municipality (Braithwaite, 2020). This underscores the importance of integrating local context into both policy design and implementation. Geza et al. (2022) argue that considering the socio-economic and geographic realities of youth during policy formulation ensures not only the relevance of interventions but also their feasibility across varied contexts. In rural municipalities, this contextualisation is particularly vital to linking youth meaningfully with employment opportunities that align with their circumstances and aspirations. Without such targeted strategies, development initiatives risk excluding those who are most in need of support (Wilkinson et al., 2017).

4.3 Inadequate information dissemination

A significant gap in youth development programmes is the ineffective dissemination of information, particularly concerning business education and access to market networks. Many young individuals lack adequate knowledge and expertise in critical areas such as entrepreneurship, market analysis, and networking skills essential for capitalising on business and employment opportunities (Ngwenya & Shange, 2019). This gap is especially pronounced in rural areas, where labour market information is either scarce or poorly communicated. Mazwi (2020) notes that limited access to timely and relevant information disproportionately affects vulnerable youth who often lack the networks necessary to learn about available opportunities. The

consequence is a deepening of existing inequalities, where the most marginalised are least equipped to engage in local economic development.

Demographic factors further complicate the dissemination of information. Youth living in remote or isolated regions frequently face restricted access to communication infrastructure (Metelerkamp et al., 2019). Others may lack strong social networks or ties with individuals who can facilitate access to useful information (Kgopolo et al., 2020). Digital exclusion caused by poor internet connectivity or low digital literacy also remains a critical barrier (Matli & Ngoepe, 2020). These factors collectively contribute to the unequal distribution of information and, by extension, opportunity. Addressing this challenge requires development programmes to adopt inclusive and multi-modal communication strategies that account for linguistic diversity, digital access limitations, and the specific conditions of rural youth populations.

5 Methods

As a method of inquiry to understand the implementation of inclusive development programmes to reduce youth unemployment in rural municipalities, we utilised the systematic literature review analysis based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) flow diagram. Utilising the PRISMA in this study enabled the researchers to obtain critical and detailed information from peer-reviewed quantitative and qualitative material on rural youth and unemployment issues, which was critical for completing this study. Further, using PRISMA was fundamental in expediting the efficiency of systematic reviews while improving the clarity, transparency, quality and value of the reviewed reports (Liberati et al., 2009).

Drawing from Sohrabi et al. (2021), the PRISMA flow diagram was revised in 2020 to propose the five phases to adopt when conducting a systematic literature review. These include:

- *Problem formulation*
- *Literature search*
- *Evaluation of data*
- *Analysis*
- *Presentation and analysis of results.*

The researcher adopted these searches: youth development programmes, youth marginalisation, and youth poverty, to improve credibility while avoiding duplication of research articles. To ensure relevance and further enhance credibility, articles that follow up and evaluate programs over a period of at least 5 years were used. To obtain data for this study, the researchers solicited data from three main databases, Web of Science, Google Scholar and Science Direct, to yield 135 relevant results. To further explore issues affecting rural youth in South Africa, Google Scholar was consulted to yield 20 results on academic literature on the subject. This grey literature on youth empowerment, youth development programmes and youth poverty was consulted to provide distinct perspectives on the topic, while enriching the study with recent data on inclusivity in rural development programmes and analysing government publications to examine some of the challenges affecting rural municipalities' efforts to render youth development services in South Africa. To include relevant peer-reviewed articles on the topic, the researchers in the inclusion criteria looked at the scholarly nature and availability of full text. Only articles written in the English language and less than five years old were included. All articles that were irrelevant to this topic were excluded. The keywords used include rural youth, empowerment programmes, youth social cohesion and youth development.

The PRISMA diagram in Figure 1 indicates the process of preparing the article and subsequent appraisal and synthesis.

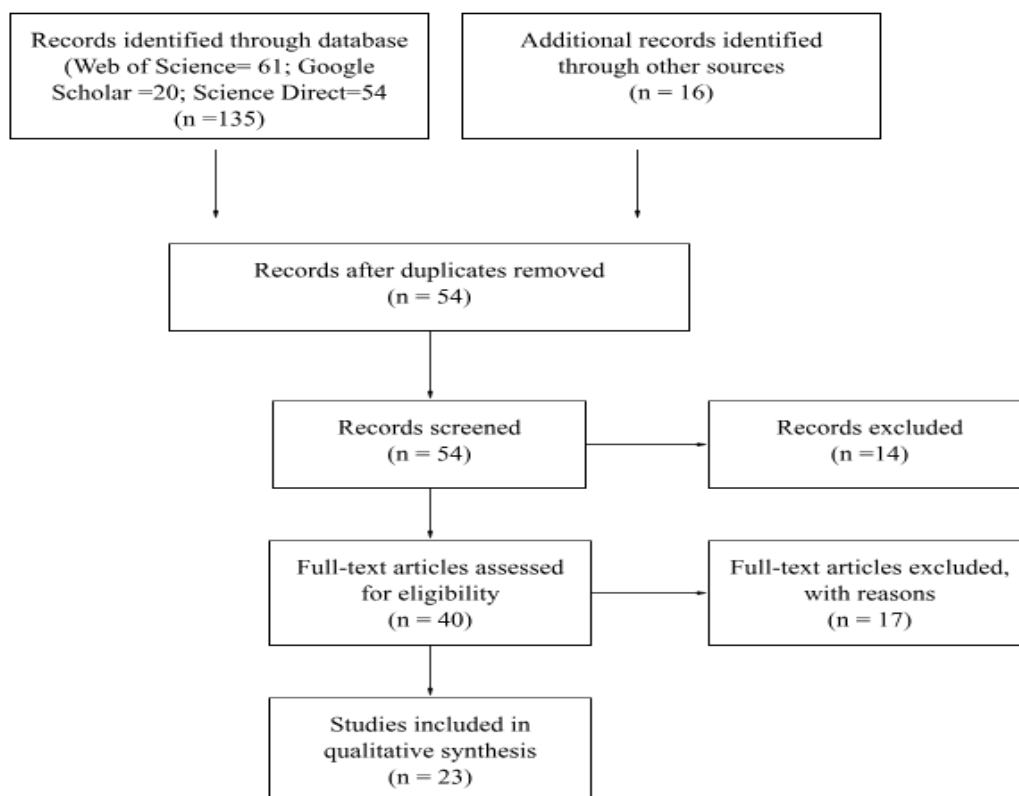


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram

6 Findings and Discussion

This section presents findings focusing on the institutional constraints facing rural municipalities in ensuring inclusivity in development programmes targeting youth unemployment.

6.1 Resource allocation

The analysis of documents revealed that the effective functioning of local government institutions is highly dependent on human and financial resources to drive reforms while upholding key service delivery imperatives such as accountability and transparency. Despite the equitable share provided by the national government to local municipalities annually, Shava (2020) argues that it is not enough to cushion rural municipalities from unprecedented shocks and to meet the diversified needs of rural citizens. Insufficient funding was noted from the systematic review as a major obstacle to achieving inclusivity in youth development programmes. While rural youth include able-bodied and also disabled youth, funding for development programmes for such diverse segments is often not available. This is a gap that a stakeholder intervention can fill to address local government limitations.

In the rural Eastern Cape, Alfred Nzo District Municipality is a typical example of local government frequently encountering financial limitations that hinder the effective implementation of youth development programmes (Buntu & Lehmann, 2015). These observations resonate with research conducted by Alexander et al. (2023), where several youth-led organisations face challenges in securing adequate funding and resources to offer essential support, including career exploration opportunities for young individuals who are out of school or unemployed. Consequently, sufficient funding for interventions targeting marginalised youth populations or offering specialised support services is not readily available. Geza et al. (2022) argue that the current financial limitation undermines the programme's effectiveness, diminishes the quality of

services, and restricts the scope and influence of interventions. To tackle this challenge, the South African national government needs to allocate more funds towards youth development programmes, taking into consideration that rurality is often associated with marginalisation and deprivation. This observation was echoed by Ezeudu and Umaru (2023), who believe that leveraging access to adequate and timely funding for youth development programmes helps sustain development programmes a step forward in mitigating youth poverty in rural municipalities.

6.2 *Capacity constraints*

Public institutions in South Africa are scaling down on service delivery due to limited capacity to drive economic, social and policy reforms. Despite a youth looking actively for employment, the analysis of study documents revealed a widening skills mismatch, which exacerbates unemployment and triggers youth frustration with labour market demands. Owing to emigration and high employee turnover, the local government in South Africa is failing to recruit and retain skilled new talent due to low remuneration or the desire of skilled experts to explore greener pastures with more lucrative remuneration, among other benefits. In 2022, a Skills Supply and Demand Report was published in South Africa by the Department of Higher Education and Training. Its findings confirm earlier assertions that an imbalance exists between labour demand and labour supply. These observations help explain the absence of capacity in the local government sphere to spearhead youth development and other local economic development initiatives.

The systematic review of extant literature showed that South African rural municipalities are not immune to the institutional deficiencies engulfing local governments in South Africa, where capacity constraints have undermined most local economic development plans as municipalities struggle to retain skilled personnel. Consequently, brain drain is evident, and many municipalities fall into medium- to high-risk categories, meaning they face severe governance, financial, and service delivery challenges. A study conducted by Shava (2023) highlighted some of the dangers encountered by struggling rural municipalities, including financial mismanagement, inadequate service provision, and an inability to implement development initiatives effectively. These challenges contribute to persistent poverty and deepening socio-economic inequalities, particularly in marginalised rural communities. Another study, conducted by Diraditsile (2022), confirmed that rural municipalities such as Alfred Nzo District Municipality face a significant challenge in effectively designing, implementing, and monitoring development programmes due to constraints in institutional capacity. The ability of rural municipalities to design focused interventions and assess programme outcomes may be impeded by a lack of human resources, technical expertise, and institutional knowledge. In his study, Mazwi (2020) submits that successful project management in rural municipalities is influenced by the quality of the staff and their level of expertise. Based on these assertions, it remains relevant for rural municipalities to attract and retain skilled expertise, which can help in driving change and developing innovative systems and approaches for effective youth development and service provision at large.

6.3 *Reinforcing coordination and collaboration*

Silo operations are very common in the implementation of youth development programmes in South African rural municipalities. This view is supported by Mangwanya and Shava (2023), who noted that silo-mentality is a scourge emanating from poor intergovernmental relations in local government planning processes. In our analysis of peer-reviewed literature, we discovered that a significant number of rural municipalities struggle to attract investment due to geographical location and poor infrastructure development, among other institutional challenges that scare stakeholders from doing business with local municipalities. Rural youth are most affected by the absence of economic opportunities, which often triggers rural-to-urban migration. This was confirmed by a study conducted by Mubangizi (2019), who noted the effects of rural-urban migration as detrimental to youth livelihoods in South Africa's rural municipalities.

The study conducted by Borat et al. (2014) corroborates these observations, stating that fragmentation and lack of coordination among various stakeholders, including government departments and civil society organisations, poses a significant challenge to effectively implementing integrated and holistic youth development strategies in South African rural municipalities. For instance, Mhlongo (2016) states that the

National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) faces challenges in providing services to rural areas due to the lack of commitment from certain municipalities to collaborate with the agency. One possible explanation as suggested by Mazwi (2020) for this phenomenon

is the municipalities' unfavourable financial situation or consolidation with other municipalities. The geographical challenges faced by the NYDA hinder its ability to empower youth in rural areas and townships effectively. While these challenges are rife in rural youth development programmes, Ezeudu and Umaru (2023) believe that efficient collaboration among pertinent stakeholders is crucial for guaranteeing the inclusiveness of development programmes and their accessibility for marginalised young individuals.

6.4 Policy and planning constraints

Compliance and implementation of legal frameworks and statutory policies have bedevilled various bureaucratic institutions globally. This challenge is widespread and has infiltrated many central and local governments in Africa. The systematic review and analysis of the literature have shown that several South African municipalities are constrained in implementing policy frameworks which also affect local government planning for youth development. Another worrying limitation is that many policies on development at the local government level do not directly offer clear guidance for effective implementation. This results in projects malfunctioning and terminating early. This is confirmed by Escamilla and Lonean (2023), who argue that policies and strategies frequently overlook the diversity among young people, failing to address their specific needs and consequently falling short of providing them with meaningful support.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that youth policies often prioritise a youth-focused approach rather than a youth-centred one (OECD, 2017). This means that young people are seen as recipients of public policies rather than active participants who contribute to the development of policies that directly address their needs. This trend is especially evident in rural youth (Vargas-Lundius & Suttie, 2014). Arguably, insufficient coordination among national policies, provincial strategies and local priorities, combined with a lack of accountability and transparency in programme implementation, can create obstacles to effective programme implementation. As argued by Mthlane (2020), this can result in inconsistencies and gaps in youth development efforts at the municipal level in South Africa. To address some of these limitations, when making decisions, policymakers and programme managers should consider various strategies to overcome financial limitations, enhance institutional capacity, encourage community involvement, enhance infrastructure, and establish reliable and transparent governance. Ezeudu and Umaru (2023) reiterate that by considering these factors, rural municipalities can overcome barriers and promote the successful implementation of youth development programmes for sustainable and inclusive development. This also aligns with Empowerment Theory, which speaks to harnessing the youth development efforts towards realising community sustainability.

6.5 Lack of monitoring and evaluation

Everywhere in the world, managing public institutions is complex due to distinct bureaucratic systems and structures that are often tied to red tape. Such institutions are sometimes immune to change as they delay decision-making in development ecosystems. South African public administration likewise subscribes to the bureaucratic approach to governing rural municipalities. The interpretation and implementation of various institutional structures and systems determine the implementation of youth development programmes in rural municipalities.

Implementing project monitoring and evaluation in rural youth development programmes has been a challenge, as stipulated in the Auditor General Report (2021/22). In our review, we noted that efficient monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are vital in evaluating the performance of rural municipalities and are critical for promoting inclusivity in youth development programmes that aim to address youth unemployment. The problem of insufficient, unreliable, inconsistent, and limited reporting on youth development is connected to frequent staff turnover, low quality of data, and the absence of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for youth initiatives. Furthermore, as Mazwi (2020) noted, the measurement of youth empowerment programmes poses challenges due to the absence of a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework. As a result,

the type of data collected to assess the effectiveness of youth interventions is influenced by the lack of standardised evaluation criteria, inconsistent data collection methods, and inadequate institutional capacity to track long-term programme outcomes (Ntoyanto, 2016). The evaluation process aims to examine these development programmes' impact on young individuals' positive growth. Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2016) argue that evaluation efforts frequently fall short in their ability to measure and investigate all aspects of programme initiatives comprehensively. Furthermore, evaluation efforts do not adequately consider the interplay of these external factors and their impact on the lives of those receiving support. To address these challenges and ensure that development programmes are responsive to the needs of all youth in the municipality, it is important to strengthen monitoring and evaluation capacities, invest in training and technical assistance for staff, and engage youth and other stakeholders in participatory evaluation processes.

7 Conclusions and Recommendations

The study utilised Human Capital Theory to understand how skills can be cultivated for rural youth to explore the economic opportunities provided by rural municipalities and stakeholders. This theory emphasises the importance of investing in education, training, and skill development to enhance employability and economic self-sufficiency. By equipping youth with relevant skills, Human Capital Theory challenges the dependency syndrome often associated with welfarism, where rural youth may rely on government assistance instead of actively pursuing economic opportunities. The skills development approach encourages self-reliance and entrepreneurship, ultimately fostering long-term economic sustainability in rural communities. This theory was used in the present study to identify the merit of empowering rural youth through skills development while challenging rural youth to harness every economic opportunity that may come their way to improve their livelihoods.

Nonetheless, the analysis of study documents noted various limitations associated with youth development programmes in the rural municipalities of South Africa. These include capacity constraints due to brain drain, which triggers inefficiency in attaining inclusive youth development. Poor resource allocation and coordination failure to conduct monitoring and evaluation are other limitations affecting youth development programmes. Most studies of poverty and local economic development confirmed these findings, and they are consistent. This is a call for governments and stakeholders to intervene and empower rural youth toward advancing their livelihoods. As the empowering theory stipulates, empowering rural youth not only addresses past inequalities but also reallocates wealth in society, in the process building capacity and confidence in future generations.

The conclusion drawn from this study highlights that to attain inclusive youth development in rural municipalities, coproduction is encouraged, whereby rural municipalities forge ties with other interested non-state actors to support and invest in rural youth in areas such as business education and project management, including monitoring and evaluation. The study at the national level advocates for the need to reinforce the National Development Vision 2030 (NPC, 2012), which aims at redirecting rural economies. Further, provincial and local governments, through other development agencies, need to provide youth with access to start-up finances which are pivotal in spearheading entrepreneurship, while targeting the inclusion of capable rural youth for driving the economy of the country. While this research emphasises the inclusion of rural youth in development programmes, the grey areas of research that could be touched upon by researchers include the uses of modern digital technologies in driving rural entrepreneurial ventures, considering the opportunities that could be triggered by Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies in mining, agriculture, and small businesses, among other economic ventures.

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