

# Community Development Projects and Sustainable Livelihoods: Evidence from Selected Projects in Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality in Limpopo Province

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**Abstract:** Development projects have been widely implemented in South Africa and the rest of the world in order to promote social and economic development. In South Africa, such projects date back to the pre-1994 era and have also been the hallmark of national development in the era of democracy. The paradox though has been the not-so apparent link between such projects and development. For the purpose of this paper the projects of interest, are in LED context. While many projects generate some incomes for beneficiaries, however, when they are assessed within the broader context of the meaning of development, it is not so clear if in fact, they have achieved such impact. In its efforts to reduce poverty and unemployment and also to grow the local economy, Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality has implemented many community development projects. While the Municipality has used its Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) to support such projects, the impact on the livelihoods of beneficiaries does not appear to be as pronounced as expected. The aim of the study was therefore to assess more systematically and in greater depth, the impact of these projects in sustaining livelihoods. The study was based on a qualitative research design where a small sample of nine beneficiaries from three different types of projects (crop farming, chicken farming and tourism) and two municipal officials or other stakeholders were interviewed. Interviews were used to collect primary data from the respondents and secondary data was collected from sources such as IDP reports, journals and articles. The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework was adopted as the theoretical lens for the analysis of selected projects.

**Keywords:** Capability, Development, Livelihoods, Projects, Sustainability

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## 1. Introduction

Globally, community development projects have become a popular tool to support the social and economic development of communities (Gilbert & Schipper, 2009:21). During the first development decades of the 1950s and 1960s, community development (CD) was actively promoted throughout the developing world as part of the state building process and as a means of raising standards of living by governments. The United Nations, through its affiliated institutions and as part of independence and decolonization movements in Africa (Briggs & Mueller, 1997:23), also embarked on development-oriented projects. Governments and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) also mobilized people in the local communities in order to establish community development projects in every local community. The motivation was that community members would be encouraged to

create their own jobs for their own empowerment. This would be achieved through improving their livelihoods and capabilities by generating incomes, skills development, assets ownership, and efforts to save and invest into business (Ferdoushi, Chamhuri & Nor Aini Hj, 2011:811). Development projects have been widely implemented in South Africa and the rest of the world in order to promote social and economic development. In South Africa, such projects date back to the pre-1994 era and have also been the hallmark of national development in the era of democracy. Since attaining democracy, the government has developed policies and strategies to advance community development. These include Reconstruction of Development Programmes, White Paper of 1998, and Local Economic Development Programmes (LED) (IDP, 2016/2017:09). Community development is integrated in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa under provisions on developmental local governance (Constitution of the

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Republic of South Africa, Chapter 108 of 1996:152-153) and mandated local government to assume a development role. Through the instrument of the Integrated Development Plan (IDP), local government, in consultation with communities, identifies their development priorities and is expected to allocate resources and support implementation thereof (IDP 2016/2017:12).

Local government is one of the spheres of government nearest to local communities is well placed to identify, drive and implement programmes aimed at addressing growth and development challenges facing South Africa. Increasingly, municipalities have assumed an important role in ensuring that substantive and beneficial development takes place within their jurisdictions (Pieterse, 2000:37). One of the challenges facing the municipality is the alleviation of poverty and the creation of job opportunities in rural areas (IDP, 2016/2017:10). In the wake of the United Nations Agenda 2030, the international community, including South Africa, has committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) whose central goal is to ensure that development is both inclusive and sustainable. This agenda is also relevant in the context of community development projects because sustainability implies that they must be designed and implemented in a manner that creates or generates sustainable livelihoods. In response to the many development challenges facing the Lepelle-Nkumpi municipality, a number of community development projects have been initiated such as; crop farming, poultry, tourism, livestock projects and etc. Some of these projects are successful and some are collapsing, municipal IDP indicates that livestock projects are more successful than others. However, it is not clear what impact these projects have made on the livelihoods of beneficiaries and whether they are sustainable or not. The main aim of this paper is to investigate the impact of community development projects in sustaining the livelihoods of project beneficiaries in Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality. The study was guided by the following key research objectives: (i) To examine the design and implementation of past and current community development projects, (ii) To assess the impact of these projects on the livelihoods of community members and (iii) To suggest strategies that can be implemented in order to address any issues that might emerge from the study. The interview guide was guided by the following key research questions were: (i) What projects have been implemented in Lepelle-Nkumpi

municipality, (ii) How have they been implemented, and (iii) What impact have they had on sustainable livelihoods of beneficiaries and their dependents?

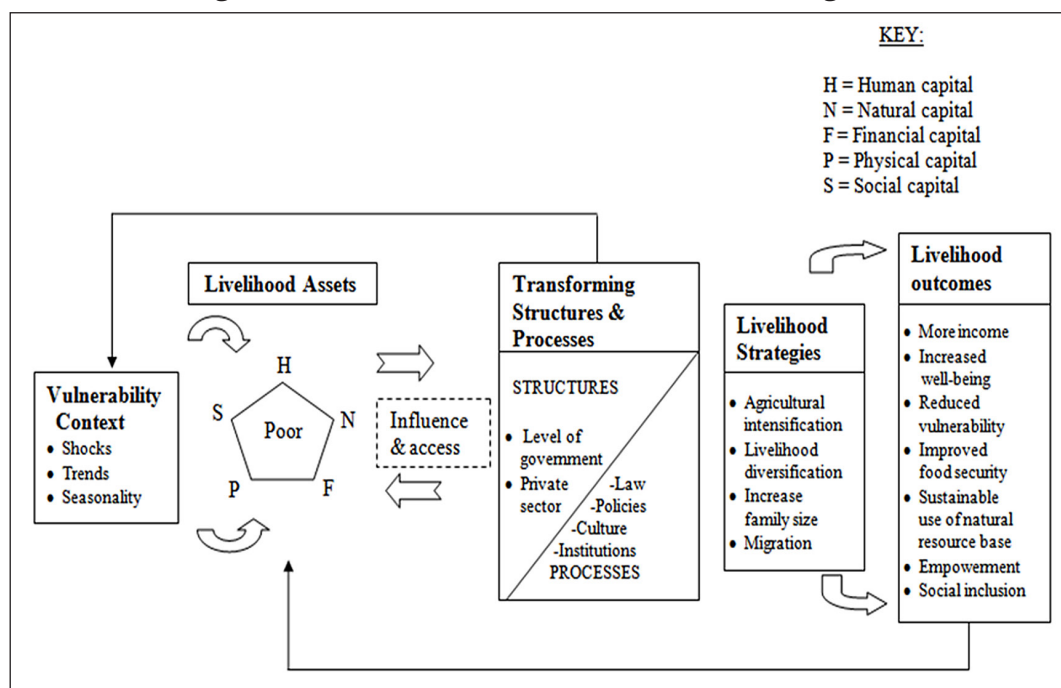
## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Community Projects as a Tool for Local Development**

In the last two decades' community development projects have been a popular tool aimed at reducing poverty in the rural settings of South Africa. Many such initiatives are implemented, based on the common understanding that community-based development helps poor rural communities in their striving towards integration in the national economy. The emphasis on community development in South Africa emanates from the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) (South Africa 1994: paragraph 1.3.3) which is conceptualised to bring about social development by means of a people-driven process. The processes involve that communities must take responsibility for their own development, and as a result, they have to be empowered to do so (Tondaro & Smith, 2006:76). The government, Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and development practitioners within the country are increasingly focusing their attention on strategies which build upon local knowledge, skills and resources (Binns & Nel, 2002:28). NGOs are voluntary institutions that play a significant role in community development and poverty alleviation. International and local NGOs provide services by raising funds, engaging in different relief and development activities, whilst a number of them carry out advocacy programs within the society. Evidence shows that some of the government strategies to fight unemployment and poverty are called RDP and Local Economic Development (LED) this is done through funding and supporting of community projects within the municipalities. Many municipalities are unclear about the meaning of LED and how to implement it (Nel, 2001: 3).

The issue of non-clarification of roles among national government, provinces, municipalities, civil society and the private sector; result in different players having different understandings and interpretations of the LED policy (IDP, 2017:59). Ineffective policy implementation to some extent contributes to additional constraints facing the achievement of growth and development objectives. International experience has demonstrated that district and local municipalities can play a pivotal role in LED initiatives

Figure 1: Sustainable Livelihood Framework Diagram



Source: Ferdoushi *et al.* (2011)

for poverty alleviation. Municipalities are strategically placed to undertake long-term planning in the arena of poverty alleviation, particularly as it relates to relationships with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs) and the private sector (Pieterse, 2000:66).

## 2.2 Theoretical Relationship Between Community Development Projects and Sustainable Livelihoods

Thomas (2004:1) argues that development is 'contested, complex and ambiguous'. For Sen (1999:40), in his work "Development as a freedom", ushers in human rights into the development discourse. He argues that development is not simply about material change but has to encompass change which brings about freedom to human beings. These freedoms encompass five different types of freedom: 'political freedom, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security'. Development is a multi-dimensional and complex process of change which must meet both material (for example, basic needs) as well as the non-material dimensions of the life of people (the different freedoms in Sen's conceptualisation). Development theories inform the community development (CD) practice. The researchers have adopted sustainable livelihoods as a framework which guided them through this paper.

### 2.2.1 Sustainable Livelihoods (SLA) Approach

According to Tufinio & Mooi & Ravestijn & Bakker & Boorsma (2013:584) sustainability in the projects is defined by four aspects: making process as efficient as possible, looking into the materials to be more sustainable, considering the longer-term and integrating the community in terms of project, sustainability is making sure that the project you are executing contributes to your business now and in the future. Ellis (2000:179) emphasised that 'sustainability' means the ability for humans to recover from shocks and stress. Ellis's definition was adopted by the researchers as it guided them in their discussions and analyzing of data collected. This approach takes into account the livelihood assets of people (human, natural, economic or financial, social and physical capital). The livelihoods of the people are influenced by the context (shocks, trends and seasonality) and by policies, institutions and processes. If policies, institutions and processes assist people to survive and prosper in the vulnerability context (of shocks, trends and seasonality) and improve livelihood outcomes without negatively affecting the environment, sustainable livelihoods are enhanced (Ferdoushi *et al.*, 2011:811). See Figure 1.

In the context of this study, the SLF mentioned above is useful to determine community resilience in a holistic way. The external environment can have detrimental effects on vulnerable communities if they are not sufficiently proposed by various groups of

livelihood assets. External shocks, seasonality and other external trends for example: an economic downturn or an environmental event such as drought can create sudden changes to the livelihoods of communities. The five types of capital described under livelihood assets are necessary in creating safety nets that can assist to ride out sudden changes caused by external changes or events. Institutions, policies and government support can assist in preserving these various forms of livelihood capital. The framework helped the researchers to be able to assess the impact in terms of project beneficiaries being able to afford a better living standard for example, being able to save, invest, buy materialist, asset accumulation and sending their children to varsity.

### **2.3 What Factors Determine Success or Failure in Terms of Impacting Livelihoods of People?**

A sustainable community development project should preferably have a positive effect not only on the involved, but also bring about development in the community as a whole. Considering the communities' livelihoods, one of the most important aspects mentioned by agricultural economist Ellis (2000:59) is that 'sustainability' means the ability for humans to recover from shocks and stress. The sustainable livelihood approach presented by DFID (1999:88) is a feasible theoretical instrument to understand the livelihoods of the rural population. The framework presents the main assets influencing the communities' livelihoods. No single asset is sufficient for rural households to develop sustainable livelihood strategies; livelihood strategies will most likely depend on an interrelation between assets from the five capitals: natural, financial, physical, human and social. Altogether, access to these assets determines the vulnerability of the individual household to shocks, trends and seasonality (DFID, 2002:47). Based on this definition if humans fail to recover from shocks and stress then their livelihoods is not enhanced and it will lead to failure. Evidence indicates that some of tourism run projects emphasize the difficulties of obtaining self-sustainability in projects that relied heavily on external funds in their start-up and not an actual demand from visitors. However, it is also important with patience as it takes time to develop sustainable poverty alleviation and proper skills. Thus maintaining economic growth depends largely on how the trust will respond on market failure and the potential loss of jobs, if the external funding comes to an end (Binns & Nel, 2002:47).

### **2.4 Emerging Issues**

While community projects have become a very important tool for development in many South African communities, the evidence does not really show that they have been effective in sustaining the livelihoods of the communities. Additionally, even though many municipalities are implementing various projects in their areas, there is limited information on their impact particularly when considered in the broader context that is embodied in a Sustainable Livelihoods framework. Many projects yield incomes to beneficiaries but the extent to which they develop or strengthen their capability is not clear. In addition, evidence is also limited in terms of how far projects have enabled communities to acquire assets and build social capital. These gaps justify the need for further research on the subject of projects. This study aims to contribute towards filling this knowledge gap.

## **3. Research Methods**

This study adopts an interpretivist research paradigm. The rationale for its selection is that the interpretivist approach is based on the notion that reality is constructed by social actors and people's perceptions of it. To understand the social world from the experiences and subjective meanings that people attach to it, interpretivist researchers favour to interact and to have a dialogue with the studied participants (Ponterotto, 2005:127).

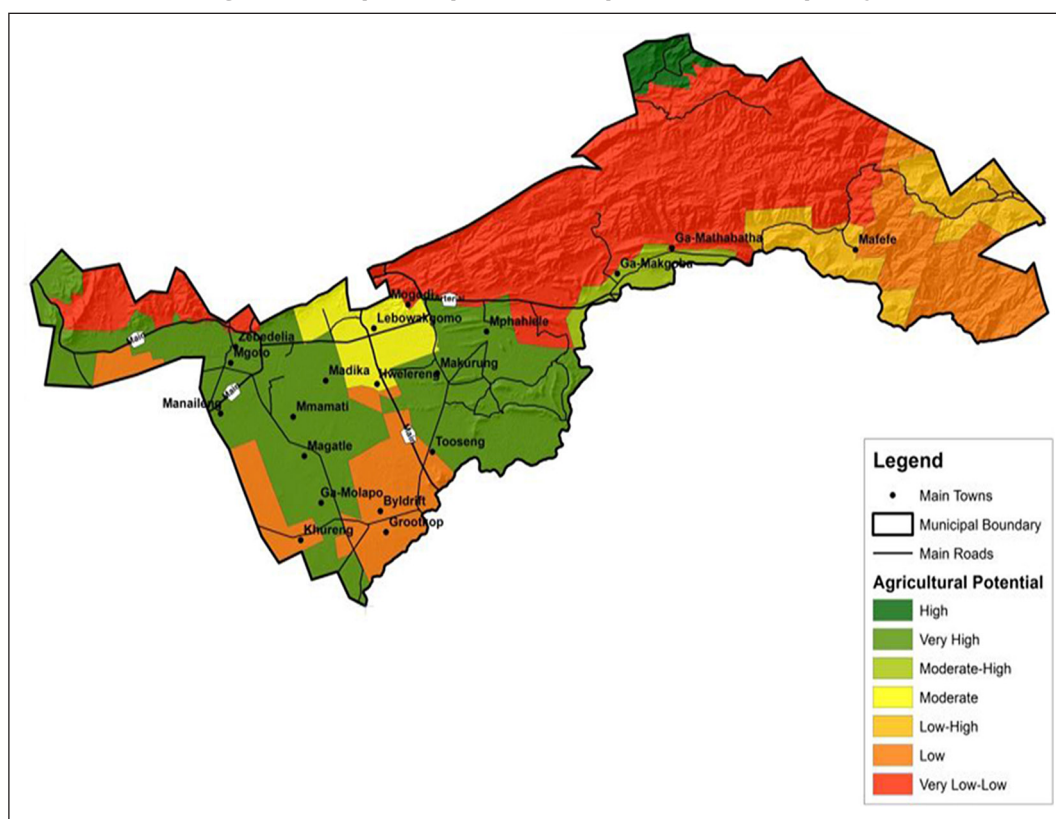
### **3.1. Area of Study**

The area of study was at Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality which is located 61km southern part of the Capricorn district and Polokwane city. According to the Stats SA Census 2011 results, the municipality has an estimated population of 230 350 people with a total of 59 682 households and an average household size of 3.9 There are 30 wards in the municipality with an average size of 8000 people (IDP, 2016/2017:59). See Figure 2 on the next page.

### **3.2 Research Design**

The research design used in this study is qualitative. The qualitative design enables the researcher to gather authentic data from participants who live in the specific reality that is being explored and analysed. The researcher is therefore able to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of

Figure 2: Map of Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality



Source: Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality IDP, 2016/2017

study (Rawal, 2001:33). It was for this reason that the researchers are chosen to interview the beneficiaries of selected projects, together with some of the municipal officials.

### 3.3. Population

The population of the study was 70 community projects which are spread in 5 clusters within the municipality named: Lebowakgomo, Zebediela; Mafefe, Mathabatha and Mphahlele clusters. (IDP, 2016/2017:58). The sample for the study were three different projects so that each type of project can be explored based on its uniqueness.

### 3.4 Sample, Sampling Methods and Sample Size

A sample is a subgroup of the target population that the researcher plans to study for generalising about the target population (Creswell, 2013:37). In this study the sample was the target population of various community development projects in Lepelle-Nkumpi municipality. The researchers have adopted purposive sampling which falls under a non-probability sampling method. The study was

based on a qualitative research design where a small sample of nine beneficiaries from three different types of projects (crop farming, chicken farming and tourism) and two municipal officials were interviewed.

### 3.5 Data Sources

Data were obtained from both primary and secondary sources. For the purpose of this study, primary data were collected from projects beneficiaries of Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality and municipal officials. The rationale of using primary data was to be able to gather first-hand information from the project implementers and to explore their views, feelings, opinions and challenges. Secondary data were collected through the review of project documents from Lepelle-Nkumpi Municipality. Journals, articles, books, internet, municipality documents, IDP reports, LED unit, municipality annual reports and other literature also contributed to enriching the findings of this study.

### 3.6 Data Collection Procedure

The procedure for data collection started with the sending of a letter to the municipality requesting

permission to conduct the study. This was followed by a consultation with relevant stakeholders in the LED unit, project managers, beneficiaries and community development officers. The purpose of the consultation was to seek permission to interview them. The topic under investigation was discussed during the meetings with the participants before they gave their consent to participate in the study.

### **3.6.1 Data Collection Methods**

The data collection method refers to the way in which information regarding the topic is collected. De Vos (2002:340) confirms that a qualitative study typically employs unstructured or semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were used as a data collection method and the interview schedule guide was used during interviews on twelve participants involved in three identified projects within the municipality. Face to face interview was fostered with three municipal officials who were involved in community development as they were knowledgeable about the issues involving community projects and livelihoods. Focus groups were administered with project beneficiaries because they tend to encourage participation.

### **3.6.2 Data Analysis**

Data analysis means to pass a judgement, to use reasoning, and to reach a conclusion based on evidence (Neuman, 2000:274). The data collected in this study was in a form of qualitative data. Thematic analysis was used to process the data. This is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, it also often goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006:87).

## **4. Findings and Discussions**

The main objective of this paper was to analyse and present data collected in the experience of the respondents in terms of the impact of community projects in sustaining the livelihoods of the community at Lepelle-Nkumpi Local community. Data were gathered through observations and interviews with respondents participating in various three community projects (Mamaolo farming, Mbaio poultry and Mathabatha Arts and culture projects) with a sample of nine project beneficiaries and two municipal officials. The data collected were subjected to qualitative analysis through thematic coding. Based

on the analytical framework of SLA, the interview guide examined a wide range of issues. The results are presented in the following way: responses from project beneficiaries first followed by the responses from the LED officials.

### **4.1 Personal Characteristics of the Respondents**

We begin by describing the personal profiles of the respondents. Participants were mostly middle-aged men and women between the ages of 45-50. The results suggest that married women and men benefited more from the project as compared to single men. The evidence revealed that most of projects in the municipality have few youths, whilst youth unemployment is high.

### **4.2 Educational Attainment**

Most of the participants attained western education and dropped out at grade 5-9, while few of them reported to have completed matric. The findings imply that the most of the participants were illiterate. The following were the key findings from the study:

#### **4.2.1 Initiation of Projects and Implementation**

Most of the participants reported that they were not involved at the initiation of the project and implementation. They reported that they found projects operating when they were applying for employment. A project manager from crop farming project reported that she was involved in the designing and implementation of the project and she further reported that she was partnered with another woman from her community to initiate the project. She reported that the reason for establishing the project was to generate income and to create jobs. The findings showed that most of the participants were not involved in the decision making and implementation of the projects. The sustainability of livelihoods of the participants is not enhanced as they do not feel a sense of ownership and it was reported that nothing has changed as they are not consulted nor included in decision-making.

#### **4.2.2 Projects and Financial Support**

The participants from Mamaolo crop farming project reported that the project was funded by Department of Agriculture and LED. The project was funded by Department of Agriculture in 2011 and from the LED was once off funding in 2013.

The project depends on marketing and selling of its products to produce funds, currently the project is not doing well because of shortage of markets. It was reported that 12 employees dropped out and the project has left with 3 employees and a manager. The participants from Mbaio poultry project reported that the project is struggling with funds. The project was funded by LED unit in 2013 and the funding was once off. The participants reported that the project is not doing well as 10 employees were terminated due to financial issues. The project depends on marketing and selling of its products to generate funds, currently the project is not doing well because of shortage of markets and it was reported that the community is not supportive. The project is currently having 4 employees and one manager. Findings on Mathabatha Arts and culture tourism project were reported that the project was funded by LED unit in 2013 and Department of Arts and Culture in 2015 on a once off funding. The participants reported that the project depends on the tourist to generate funds and currently the project is doing well as tourists visit the project and also the local community is supportive. The project consists of 10 employees and 2 project managers. The evidence indicates that all the three projects had any financial support from government from the past 2 years. Two the projects revealed that they are struggling with funds and while only one reported to be doing well with funds. Interpretation of the above findings in relation to sustainable livelihoods it is clear that the projects are having a negative impact on sustaining the livelihoods of the participants and the projects also experience financial constraints.

#### **4.2.3 Community Projects and Livelihoods of Beneficiaries**

It was reported that Mamaolo crop farming produces vegetables such as spinach, tomato, cabbage, beetroots and onions. Whereas Mbaio poultry project buy, raise and sell chickens to the community. Mathabatha arts and cultural tourism projects preserve culture. The project produces and promotes traditional symbols, cultural dance, sewing cultural necklace, bracelet and clothes, visual arts, and crafts. The project generates funds through selling of cultural products and entrance fees from tourists and local community. Most of the participants indicated that they were offered employment without contracts and have been employed for more than 10 years. All of the participants reported that the projects are not contributing in building their capacities and competencies. Findings revealed that most

of the participants earned less than R2000.00 and the income was not adequate to meet their households' needs or well-being. All of the participants reported that they never acquired assets with the income they received from the project since they were employed. These findings indicate that the projects do not have a positive impact in sustaining the livelihoods of the participants in terms of income, capabilities, empowerment and assets. This was because all of the three projects were not doing well in terms generating funds or profit.

#### **4.2.4 Human Capital**

The SLA indicate that livelihoods assets for human capital are enhanced when project beneficiaries are able to receive adequate health, nutrition, education, knowledge and skills, capacity to work and capacity to adapt (Ferdoushi *et al.*, 2011:811). The findings indicate that none of the participants have received a formal training and workshop for skills development since they have been employed. The evidence revealed that all of the project beneficiaries have been working within their projects without skills, knowledge, competency of managing the project and this had negative impact on sustaining their livelihood.

#### **4.2.5 The Role of LED Unit (Participants) in Community Development Projects**

The findings from the participants indicated that from the past 10 years their role was to address development backlogs and poverty alleviation through initiation of LED projects and funding of those projects within the community in order to promote sustainable economic growth. The participants indicated that their role changed after the review of the LED programmes in 2015. The LED programme was reviewed because most of the LED projects were not sustainable and the LED unit was working at the loss and its objectives were not attained. The participants reported that the new LED programmes were implemented in 2017 as mandated within municipal IDP. The objective of the new LED programmes is to encourage local business growth and support for new enterprises by linking them with relevant stakeholders. LED officials reported that their role is to link project beneficiaries with relevant stakeholders such as Department of Agriculture, Department of Arts and Culture, Department of Health, Department of Social Development and etc. The other role is to provide information and marketing assistance to projects beneficiaries. Participants indicated that the municipal LED unit is no longer supporting community

development projects with finance. It was reported that the LED unit provides services that promote self-reliant, self-growth, empowerment, capacity building and services that build on capabilities of communities through linking relevant stakeholders such as; Limpopo Economic Development Agency (LEDA), National Youth Development Agency (NYDA), Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) with community projects. The participants indicated that the new LED programme is effective it enhances the livelihoods of communities and project beneficiaries in terms of promoting sustainable economic growth.

What do these findings mean overall? The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) which was described in the theoretical framework is used as a lens to interpret the results. The SLA clearly demonstrates that the sustainability of the livelihoods of individuals or communities critically depends on their access to or ownership of livelihoods assets, the existence of transforming structures and processes for their empowerment or upliftment, the kind of livelihood strategies that are used and finally, the livelihood outcomes from any interventions or actions that are implemented by the individuals themselves or other actors, government or non-government. Those livelihood outcomes should include, but are not necessarily limited to increased income, increased well-being, reduced vulnerability, improved food security, empowerment and social inclusion. The results from the study indicate that although beneficiaries of the projects that were studied, did benefit in terms of some income and employment, the project interventions had such a limited impact because they did not lead to any significant acquisition of assets by beneficiaries. The incomes were also deemed to be insufficient for the needs of the participants. Furthermore, there was no evidence that the beneficiaries were empowered by the projects.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

It was evident that the projects were initiative in response to the poverty, unemployment and other social challenges which exist in the municipality. The findings revealed that all of the three projects were initiated for the purpose promoting culture, creation of employment to alleviate poverty and unemployment. Although the study was based on a small sample of projects of Lepelle-Nkumpi Local Municipality, some useful findings were unearthed. Based on the analytical framework of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, it was found

that even though these projects did generate some jobs and incomes to the beneficiaries, they were not impacting significantly on their livelihoods. A number of observations led us to this conclusion. Firstly, most of the participants were not included in the design of the projects and decision making. Secondly, the impact of the projects was not as expected because the income generated was not adequate for the needs of the beneficiaries. Thirdly, the participant did not acquire any assets from the income received and they did not feel empowered by virtue of having participated in the projects. Lastly, the projects were not financially sustainable, implying that their future existence was questionable. We therefore concluded that these projects are not a viable basis for the sustainability of the livelihoods of the beneficiaries.

Recognizing that the findings of a qualitative study cannot be generalized because of the small sample size, we recommend that these findings could be used as a basis for a larger quantitative and qualitative study which is representative of the different types of projects in the municipality. The purpose of that study would be to assess the extent to which community development projects can be a basis for sustaining the livelihoods of communities. We also recommend that the municipality can also draw lessons from this study. In particular, they could consider the following specific recommendations which emanate from the study:

### **5.1 Customised Training of Community Project Members**

The community projects which are funded by government departments should be taken through a series of customized training programmes that suit the respondents' educational levels and the type of business ventured into with a view of improving on the current levels of performances.

### **5.2 Community Projects as Businesses**

Community projects should be seen or viewed as business ventures, than just a mere poverty alleviation projects. Community projects should therefore be run as businesses rather than as projects which are always expecting to be continuously entitled to funding by sponsors. Currently, members expect to be the recipients of financial support from sponsors rather than refining the quality of their products to appeal and attract more clients.



### 5.3 Quality Assurance on Products and Services

Types of capacity buildings provided to the project members should encompass series of training on quality assurance and product selection. So that the project beneficiaries can be able to prove to sponsors that the business concept ventured into has viability and sustainability potential in the future. Projects funded by sponsors need to have the return on the value of the public resources invested into those sponsored projects.

### 5.4 Monitoring and Evaluation of Sponsored Community Projects

Municipalities need to assist in the monitoring of state funded projects and integrate their update reports during its public participation programmes for the projects to be held accountable on the utilisation of public funds and resources.

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