

## UTILIZING LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AS A TECHNIQUE FOR DEVELOPMENT TO COMBAT POVERTY AND UNEMPLOYMENT: A CASE STUDY OF POLOKWANE MUNICIPALITY, SOUTH AFRICA

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Volume: 5  
 Number: 4  
 Page: 714 - 725

### Article History:

Received: 2024-05-22

Revised: 2024-06-24

Accepted: 2024-07-15

### Abstract:

For many countries worldwide, unemployment, poverty, and inequality are the most significant problems. These also apply to South Africa. In essence, local economic development (LED) is an ongoing procedure spearheaded by local stakeholders, particularly the local government, built upon local efforts to stimulate the local Economy and provide employment in a given area. Using the Polokwane municipality as a case study, the study aims to examine the contribution of local economic development in reducing unemployment in South Africa. The research also aims to ascertain how much Polokwane Municipality's local economic development organizations aid in reducing poverty. To thoroughly understand the subject matter, the study will employ a qualitative research approach and involve participants from various municipal levels involved in local economic development, such as agencies, municipal officials, and beneficiaries. The study followed a qualitative research methodology, a type of social science research that collects and works with non-numerical data and seeks to interpret meaning from these data that help us understand social life by studying targeted populations or places. It employed theme analysis to find, arrange, and present themes, and their sub-themes surfaced from study interviews. The research suggested using local economic development to reduce poverty and provide jobs.

**Keywords:** Job creation, local economic development, poverty, unemployment, Polokwane Municipality.

## INTRODUCTION

Any economy that wants to lower unemployment and promote economic development must have employment growth that is faster than economic growth. Creating jobs is among the key pillars of every Economy. It has been challenging to create new jobs globally, particularly in a context with slow economic growth. Both in developed and developing countries, local economic development is a strategy and procedure for local growth (Odhiambo, 2010). Using LED, the community is urged to work together to accomplish sustainable local development and economic growth, improving the standard of living and the local Economy (Masikane, 2021).

Koma (2014) claims that the South African government's economic growth and development objectives were formed during the previous several years to alleviate poverty, generate employment, and establish sustained economic growth. The imperatives of both national and provincial development have since been realized through the implementation of several developments-driven strategies and programs, including the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the Provincial Growth and Development Strategies (PGDS), the National Spatial Development Framework (NSDP), and others. South African government presented a clear perspective and tactical orientation for how it plans to steer the economy and growth trajectory, with a particular emphasis on intervening in favor of the impoverished and marginalized segments of society.



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Koma (2014) asserts that fulfilling the fundamental growth and development goals of the national and provincial development frameworks depends on the level of government. In keeping with constitutional requirements, local government must engage in a significant role to encourage economic and social progress. Therefore, municipalities have taken on a key role in promoting local economies, eliminating poverty, and creating jobs through the local economic development program. Therefore, a coordinated and integrated approach is needed to achieve growth and development from all branches of government. South Africa is leading the fight against high unemployment rates.

The unemployment rate reached a record high of 32.9% in the first quarter of 2024 from 32.1% in the fourth quarter of 2023 (Stats SA, 2024). South Africa has likewise needed help with its prolonged rate of economic expansion. Between 2021 and 2022, the average growth rate was just under 1.9 percent, while between 2023 and 2024, it was below 1 percent (Stats SA, 2024). The slow growth rates have adversely affected South Africa's ability to create jobs (Maswanganyi, 2014). Thus, the study's principal goal was to assess the impact of local economic development on employment creation (Unemployment) in South Africa and to look for potential remedies for the high unemployment rate in the country.

**Determining What Constitutes Local Economic Development (LED).** As Odhiambo (2010) stated, local economic development is a strategy and procedure to achieve localized economic growth in developed and developing nations. LED urges locals to collaborate to have the capacity to accomplish steady local economic expansion and development, which improves the local Economy and standard of living (Ngubane, 2011). The study of local economic development involves multiple disciplines, including marketing, economics, and physical planning. In an interdisciplinary setting, LED aims to increase a community's economic potential to enhance its present and future economic standing and everyone's standard of living. Globally, local economic development gained attention as a socioeconomic means of addressing poverty, unemployment, and development issues and correcting market imperfections (Masikane, 2021).

According to Masikane (2021), the business sector, civic society, and local government are some of the significant stakeholders of LED. The advancement of local economic development takes stakeholders' participation into account (Nel & Rogerson, 2016). The community's economic capability is developed and enhanced through local economic development, enhancing each person's standard of living. It is a procedure wherein partners to enhance the conditions for economic growth, the public, private, and non-governmental sectors work together and the generation of jobs (Swinburn et al., 2006). LED is a procedure community-based organizations or local governments use to promote or sustain employment and business development (Leigh & Blakely, 2013). Since local government is essential toward the progress of LED, Masikane (2021) defines LED as an approach that municipalities oversee in compliance with their constitutional obligation to promote economic and social progress.

Lawrence and Hadingham (2008) state that for regional economies to compete internationally, they must discover ways to reinforce their comparative advantages and increase local competitiveness. Therefore, LED can bolster local economies and make them more competitive globally. The issue for LED is figuring out how to best utilize local knowledge and resources for the welfare of every resident in a particular geographic area. According to Troutdale (2015), as stated by Masikane (2021), LED is a collaborative process that brings together individuals from all walks of life in each community to promote and activate local business ventures to create a robust and robust local economy. Bartik (2014) defines LED as the power source of the regional Economy to

produce wealth for the local populace. Accordingly, Meyer-Stamer (2009) asserts that LED can raise revenue and improve the living conditions of locals in each area, town, or even region.

By making information more accessible and lowering barriers to entry for small businesses, implementing LED helps address market failures (Masikane, 2021). Meyer-Stamer (2009) states that another goal of LED is to foster favorable business growth environments. LED can be defined as a procedure in which the non-governmental, commercial, and public sectors work together to enhance local citizens' living standards through economic development. LED is now widely used globally and generally employed to fight poverty and reduce unemployment in rural and urban places (Nijaki & Worrel, 2012). The most potential is found in local governance to help growth, focusing on drawing in investments, generating employment, and rising demand levels. As of 1994, the obligation of South Africa's local government sector has expanded to encompass LED and offer public goods and essential social services (Local Government Support Program in ARMM, 2009).

The LED strategy is exhibited by directly addressing the needs of the disadvantaged in the neighborhood or through pro-market initiatives to engage in the global neo-liberal market (Rogerson, 2012). According to Hambleton and Bartick (2017), encouraging "local" as a new space for leadership, intervention, and development action requires consideration of several critical factors, including social capital, the emergence of local champions, issues of local leadership, and the significance of partnership formation. According to Hambleton and Bartick (2017), local economies have been affected differently by shifts in the national and global economies. For instance, a global change in the price of gold could lead to the closure of a gold mine, which employs most people in a small town, creating a high unemployment rate (Cerisola, 2018). According to Ayanibu and Houghton (2017), local economic development promotes the utilization of local resources for employment creation and improves social circumstances sustainably.

LED programs are frequently implemented to help underprivileged communities thrive during economic downturns and expand their prospects (Schaffer, 2011). Based on localizing economics, LED integrates the advancement of social and economics in a community-centered way to encourage local communities' social, cultural, ecological, and economic health and welfare (Vale & Maseko, 2009). For instance, neighborhood business associations advocate for real estate developments and preferential tax rates with the government to spur growth in certain commercial areas (King, 2008). According to Veldwish (2009), LED is a viable substitute for traditional economic development and may be the answer to society's ills, including unemployment, poverty, environmental damage, and loss of collective authority. Consequently, LED boosts the local Economy's potential and enhances its future economic potential and everyone's living standards (Lejars & Venot, 2017).

According to Fine (2018), the potential of the community to change in response to the constantly shifting local, national, and international market economy establishes its degree of success. LED is frequently employed strategically by communities to boost the area's potential as a hub for local economic activity, improve the climate for investment and increase productivity and competition for companies, workers, and entrepreneurs (Woodhouse, 2017). Therefore, stakeholders' comprehension of LED processes is essential for communities to combat poverty, develop new economic possibilities, and improve the quality of life. According to Jones and Muller (2016), LED stakeholders can thrive in the market economy by possessing this insight. In order to remain competitive, LED technology must incorporate best practices, which include strategic planning and execution, in addition to knowledge and insights from global cities and initiatives (Brida et al., 2016).



**LED policy framework in South Africa.** Legal frameworks have governed the concept of LEDs ever since South Africa's revolution began (Masuku et al., 2016). The foundation of LED is a series of official initiatives designed by the government to deal with the developmental requirements of the poor communities nearby. The National Spatial Development Perspective (NSDP) is one of these programs, and it mandates that each province create the growth and development of its province plan. The local governments and the district also create Integrated Development Plans (IDPs). The district and local municipality IDPs should incorporate their economic development plans. Nonetheless, many towns need more clarity on LED and the best way to use it (Khambule, 2018; Koma, 2012). LED planning in South Africa was restricted to sporadic local development efforts spearheaded by municipal administrations in the nation's biggest cities before the democratic transition.

The 1998 White Paper on Local Government presented local government growth and created and acknowledged the legal and policy foundation for requiring LED for all South African local authorities. The Local Municipal Systems Act of 2000 established several tasks and obligations for LEDs, including the prerequisite that local governments engage in integrated development planning (Nel & Rogerson, 2005).

In addition to the NDP and IDP, the following legislative frameworks in South Africa facilitate the implementation of LED:

The primary legislation governing the design and execution of LED in South African municipalities is the South African Constitution (no. 108 of 1996). The Constitution empowers Local governments to administer local affairs democratically and answer to the Public (SALGA, 2015). The South African Constitution puts local governments' planning and execution of LED projects into action. It motivates them to ensure that nearby areas receive high-quality, enduring, dependable, and reasonably priced services. In addition, the Constitution supports the use of LEDs since they promote a healthy and safe environment. Additionally, it promotes collaboration between neighborhood associations and local communities to participate in initiatives and decision-making processes impacting local governments (SALGA, 2015). Section 51(1) of the Constitution outlines all municipalities' developmental responsibilities, including organizing and managing their budget, planning, and administration in a way that prioritizes meeting their constituents' basic needs and advancing social and economic development.

Additionally, the planning and execution of LED in local governments is encouraged by the White Paper on Local Government 1998. By encouraging local governments to commit to working with community stakeholders to determine needs and find ways to enhance living standards, the White Paper supports the implementation of LED. It does this by translating the goals and responsibilities of the Constitution into the notion of local government development (Mashamaite & Lethoko, 2018). Rather than focusing on employment creation, Triegaardt (2007) claims that the White Paper on Local Government offers an LED framework to foster growth. According to Mashamaite and Lethoko (2018), the White Paper identifies three key growth results that local governments should prioritize: delivering services and infrastructure for sustainable households, creating liveable, integrated communities, and promoting LED, community empowerment and redistribution.

The installation of LEDs in local governments has been further accelerated by the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000. It creates the Framework for local governments to plan development (Mashamaite & Lethoko, 2018). This Act's primary goal requires local governments to enhance social and economic development. Furthermore, the Act allows local governments to encourage community involvement in municipal affairs and offer reasonably priced services to their residents.

It requires local governments to ensure that stakeholders are involved in Integrated Development Plans (IDPs) planning stages, which help local governments fulfill their constitutionally mandated developmental responsibilities and achieve their goals. Local governments can approve comprehensive and strategic plans that integrate, synchronize, and coordinate plans while considering suggestions for municipalities' development by using Section 25(1) of Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000, which encourages local governments to implement LED initiatives (Meirotti & Masterson, 2018). Conversely, the IDP outlines municipal councils' goals and priorities for development, including their LED. In South Africa, each municipality must create an LED plan and connect it to its IDP.

According to Kamara (2017), LED is a crucial strategic instrument that allows local governments to carry out the developmental responsibilities outlined in Municipal Structures Act 117 of 1998. Growth in the Economy and the elimination of poverty are identified as the primary overarching aims of local economic development (LED) in the 2005 "Policy Guidelines for Implementing Local Economic Development in South Africa" (DPLG, 2005), another significant policy endeavor. The Provincial Department of Local Government published the noteworthy LED framework, Stimulating and Developing Sustainable Local Economies, in 2005 (DPLG, 2005). The Framework highlights that, as opposed to designing initiatives and making direct attempts to create jobs, municipalities can play a significant role in fostering an environment favorable to investment by offering infrastructure and high-quality services (Meyer, 2014).

South Africa's National Framework for LED focuses on the prerequisites for implementing local economic development. Besides the legal frameworks already described, additional policy standards govern LED deployment in all municipalities. For example, South Africa's 2020 economic vision is explained in the National Development Plan 2030. To end poverty and reduce inequality, the National Development Plan 2030 was developed to set a new course for the nation (Manuel, 2012). On the other hand, the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative-South Africa, 2006 (ASGISA) aims to improve economic circumstances, address poverty, and lower the unemployment rate (Hirsch, 2006).

Under the 2005 Integrated Enterprise Development Strategy, formerly marginalized people are supported in finding respectable employment and engaging in worthwhile economic endeavors. Therefore, one could argue that the legal frameworks guide municipalities as they create their economic plans to handle unemployment and poverty in their local areas and promote economic growth. Even though South Africa has several LED-related legislative frameworks, examining empirical literature indicates that these frameworks could be more effective since local economies and economic growth are developed slowly. Particularly in the most vulnerable communities, unemployment, poverty, and inadequate service delivery worsen (Meirotti & Masterson, 2018). Furthermore, Meyer (2014) contends that legal frameworks or policies sometimes do not produce different outcomes for LED.

**LEDs' contribution to reducing poverty.** The World Bank Group (2011) states that the primary goal of LED is to end poverty. According to Kahika and Karyeija (2017), LED was implemented in Uganda following the decentralization system's implementation in the 1980s with the dual goals of ensuring the advancement of equity, achieving sustained local economic growth and eradicating poverty. Kahika and Karyeija (2017) note that when Uganda adopted the decentralization system in the 1980s, LED was introduced to ensure equitable advancement, achieve sustained local economic growth, and eradicate poverty. According to Koma (2014), LEDs can help local economies grow to combat rising inequality, unemployment, and poverty rates, especially in local areas.



According to Houghton, Dlamini, and Mthembu (2013), local governments can provide essential services to their citizens through LED as a development approach, which helps to reduce unemployment, improve economic growth, and alleviate poverty. Moreover, studies (Khambule & Mtapuri, 2018) indicate that LEDs aim to lower poverty by focusing on vulnerable populations. According to Radebe and Maphela (2019), policies sometimes must provide local governments with the needed outcomes. Mahlalela (2014) found that the deployment of LED in local government had no discernible effect on reducing poverty because of capacity constraints and restricted resources. Academics have divergent opinions about how well LEDs work to reduce poverty. Therefore, by illuminating the degree to which LED aids in the reduction of poverty and tackles the problem of unemployment in Polokwane Municipality, this study fills a research vacuum.

According to Musasa and Mago (2014), tourism reduces poverty, particularly in rural areas. Rogerson and Rogerson (2012) also agree that the tourism sector's LED initiatives allow local communities to reduce poverty. According to Musavengane and Simatele (2017), tourism is essential to reducing poverty in Zimbabwe. Nel (2001) and other early authors contend that local governments in Zimbabwe are essential change agents. Their job is to meet the needs of the underprivileged and disregarded people in their communities to promote their development. According to a study by Garidzirai, Meyer, and Muzindutsi (2019), LED increases local economic growth and reduces poverty in South Africa. Like the academics above, Radebe and Maphela (2019) believe LED reduces inequality and poverty. According to Moyo and Mamobolo (2014), LED policies also seek to reduce poverty, particularly in impoverished areas.

**LED's Place in the Battle Against Unemployment.** According to Koma (2012:125), "municipalities must encourage social and economic advancement in compliance with constitutional provisions." For 2001–2010 and beyond, the Long-Term Development Framework identified three economic priorities. First, the fundamental needs must be satisfied; next, the Economy must be bolstered; and last, talents and technology must be developed. The solution to these economic problems, mainly the first two, lies in employment. To solve the issues above, the government must establish a business-friendly atmosphere. The municipality examined supply-chain guidelines to encourage rising service providers regarding work contracts and skill development. Implementing the Expanded Public Works Programme to create jobs is another example. To create jobs, local governments must assist alternative industries through development, cooperative capacity building, and essential services (Koma, 2012, p. 128).

According to Koma (2014), LED shows high unemployment and inequality in most communities. Meyer (2014) claims that by creating jobs, LED efforts raise people's quality of life. According to Meyer's (2014) theory, South African LED prioritizes developmental local governance. Municipalities are urged to plan and execute LED effectively and efficiently to play a vital role in job development. According to Oduro-Ofori (2016), the primary goals of LED are to boost regional economies, increase revenue, increase public sector performance, and generate jobs. According to Shilangu (2019), LED was implemented in South Africa to solve inequality, poverty, and unemployment problems. According to Suarez, Chicas, and Troshani (2015), LED lowers unemployment, lessens poverty, and stimulates economic expansion. LED, according to Mashabela (2020), lessens poverty and unemployment in South Africa.

Similarly, Garidzirai, Meyer, and Muzindutsi (2019) state that LED is a tool and strategy to enhance economic expansion, provide employment, and end poverty. It is evident from the previous explanation that unemployment and poverty are twin brothers. This suggests that poverty rises in response to increases in unemployment and vice versa.

**The correlation between Local Economic Development (LED) and Unemployment.** The two variables show a considerable relationship between the economic growth rate and a decrease in the unemployment rate. As growth rates rise, so does the employment rate. The connection between unemployment and economic growth in the economics literature has been investigated using experimental techniques based on the Okun law, demonstrating that GDP and unemployment rate changes have a negatively correlated relationship. Hjazeen, Seraj, and Ozdeser (2021) have successfully demonstrated a reciprocal relationship between economic expansion and unemployment. He discovered that a 1% reduction in the unemployment rate would yield a 3% increase in the actual gross domestic product (RGDP) and the opposite. Increases in employment follow increases in the RGDP. It has been noted that supply and demand theory has an application in this situation.

Eichengreen (2020) asserts that the Keynesian Economics theory is also employed to comprehend many facets of macroeconomics and employment practices. A study by Efrianti, Marwa, Tarmizi, and Yuliana (2018) made various claims and arguments on the significance and relationship between economic growth and employment, which have validated the many claims made by the writers regarding these two concepts. The evaluation by Soylyu, Cakmak, and Okur (2018) has shown that any rising country's economic progress leads to a notable increase in GDP and labor efficiency, which can help create employment opportunities for the general public.

According to Hjazeen et al. (2021), Chand, Tiwari, and Phuyal have also backed the notion that a rising economy can help with the labor force's rapid growth, eventually lowering the country's unemployment rate. Mihajlović (2020) has conversely put forth the claims that a nation's failing Economy can also arise from low productivity and that this can also lead to increased unemployment. The government and policymakers have developed different strategies to help increase employment rates and raise people's living standards and quality of life (Al-Sawaiea, 2020). Thus, it can be said that the nations may acquire more effective methods of economic expansion that will benefit the general populace by providing job possibilities and advancing the development and prosperity of the nation. Nonetheless, one factor can make unemployment unrelated to economic factors: the company's recessionary phase and ineffective job utilization, which impacts product demand (Hjazeen et al., 2021).

Economic growth is the primary goal of governments, which serves as a gauge of well-being, living standards, and the decline in poverty. Utilizing Okun's law, a few researchers have conducted empirical investigations on the connection between economic growth and unemployment. The findings demonstrated the strong relationship between growth and fluctuating unemployment rates and demonstrated how effectively economic policies work to lower the jobless rate while maintaining a stable economic expansion (Hjazeen et al., 2021).

## METHODS

The study followed a qualitative research methodology, a type of social science research that collects and works with non-numerical data and seeks to interpret meaning from these data that help us understand social life by studying targeted populations or places (Lewis, 2015). The research used non-probability sampling, which offers a deliberate grasp of the research question and central phenomenon of the investigation, whereby the researcher selects individuals and venues for evaluation (Creswell, 2007). The study employed semi-structured questionnaires to accurately describe and assess LEDs' influence on the municipality's unemployment. Thanks to the research design, respondents could voice their opinions according to how they understood the circumstances. The most popular type of analysis in qualitative research, theme analysis, emphasizes identifying

and looking at the patterns of recording for themes, which is why this study used it to analyze its data. This study included thematic analysis as a data analysis method, allowing researchers to go beyond individual experiences regarding possibilities, difficulties, and resource access.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

**Lack of funding and support for local businesses.** The study found that more financing is needed to ensure the development and implementation of LEDs. It was noted that municipalities need more funding to support LED initiatives that would create jobs in the municipality. The participants expressed that LED could not fulfill its mandate due to insufficient resources. Additionally, the local companies need to receive financial assistance for long-term expansion. This makes it challenging for the companies to thrive and give the local communities long-term jobs.

**Understanding of LED.** A lack of understanding hindered the effectiveness of LED planning and execution. Participants claimed that officials in charge of LED need to be made aware of and inexperienced with designing and implementing LED. Furthermore, they imply that the local government cannot guarantee that LED is installed, tracked, and assessed most efficiently.

**Challenges to the Economy.** Additional information from the interviews suggests that economic issues like unemployment and poverty impact the development and execution of LED projects. The panelists disagree on defining poverty and unemployment in Polokwane Municipality and contend that the South African Economy could be more friendly to startups. Furthermore, the Economy remains feeble and unchanging.

**Absence of community involvement.** The results demonstrate that while community participation in LED programs is encouraged by the South African Constitution and other legislative frameworks, this is only sometimes the practice case. Research has shown that there needs to be more community participation in the planning and execution of LED projects. The results show that the community is prohibited from participating in the planning and carrying out of LED projects. The research findings lead to the following recommendations:

**Support for local businesses.** The research findings indicate that a significant obstacle to reducing youth unemployment and poverty in Polokwane Municipality is the need for more assistance for emerging and local enterprises. The report suggests providing adequate support to local, startup, and small enterprises to help them generate revenue and jobs. The assistance could come from coaching, mentorship, training and development, or seed money. The municipality should also ensure that these companies can participate in tendering procedures. It is essential to shield these companies from unfavorable competition.

**Identifying and training qualified LED officials.** Every organization's most precious asset is its human capital. Regretfully, the data from both this and earlier studies indicates that one of the issues affecting South African organizations is a skills deficit. According to the report, the municipality still needs to hire the appropriate personnel to oversee LED projects. Considering this, the study suggests that only those who meet the necessary qualifications be assigned to design and carry out LED programs or projects. To do this, all prospective candidates must know the available positions within the municipality using proper media advertisements.

Additionally, the only candidates who should be shortlisted for interviews and the selection process are those who match the requirements. The report also suggests that nominations be made impartially and without regard to bias, nepotism, favoritism, or politics. All candidates who match the employment requirements should be offered equal opportunity, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, language, race, or color.





**Providing enough money for LED projects.** According to the report, the Polokwane Municipality's LED initiatives and programs have failed because of insufficient funding. According to the attendees, the LED needed to be more dreadfully insufficient. The report suggests that the government provide the municipality with sufficient funding. Additionally, the report recommends that the municipality find long-term financial sources to finance the LED projects. The municipality should seek out and invest in commercial prospects to do this. They can also submit applications for assistance to donor organizations.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, LEDs have the potential to boost economic growth and raise GDP, which will reduce poverty by generating additional job possibilities. There is a positive correlation between improvements in LED and a reduction in unemployment levels, indicating that improvements in LED do affect job creation at the local level of government. By addressing the issues with LED and using the suggestions given, LED will be implemented quickly. Polokwane Municipality's impoverished and marginalized residents will also benefit from LED projects since they will be implemented.

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