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## A THEMATIC SYNTHESIS OF STUDIES ON INCOME-GENERATING ACTIVITIES CONDUCTED FROM 2007 TO 2012 IN GAUTENG, LIMPOPO AND KWAZULU-NATAL: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF THE QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE

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### ABSTRACT

This paper describes a systematic review of studies on income-generating projects in poor communities. The review found that the beneficiaries experienced their participation in such activities as empowering, particularly in terms of accessing moral support. Their self-esteem was enhanced by their ability to contribute to their family's livelihood. Yet it also emerges from the evidence that the long-term impact of income-generating projects is uncertain, because of concern about the beneficiaries' abilities to independently sustain the gains. The paper recommends more complex and large-scale qualitative and quantitative systematic reviews to test more accurately whether systematic reviews of the data from income-generation programmes make better sense of developmental interventions.

**Keywords:** systematic review, thematic synthesis, income generation, poverty alleviation, social development.

### INTRODUCTION

This research paper seeks to identify relevant and meaningful themes from research studies on income-generating projects. The synthesis of the qualitative data is done in the paper in a manner that the voices of low-income beneficiaries will help to indicate why certain income-generation projects seemed to work, while others have not yielded the desired results. Beneficiaries "are seen as experts in their own lives" (Attree, 2006:55). According to Thomas and Harden (2008), over and beyond the above United Nations (UN) definition of social exclusion, in the context of this systematic review, low-income beneficiaries are defined as socially excluded are included and become the central focus of the type of research evidence that is critical for policy deliberation. Research ethics stipulates that the voices of the socially

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excluded be unconstrained to the extent that they genuinely shape research findings through methods that allow for research participants' views to be stated in their own words (Morrow, 2001).

This is significant because a body of evidence from studies on income-generating activities that are conducted in poor communities in South Africa, has yet to be systematically reviewed to form part of the core of the type of empirical evidence that could be used to track and assess the extent to which the White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997) is implemented. Poverty eradication using community development approaches seems to be failing (Dipela & Mohapi, 2021). Since the enactment of the White Paper, systematic reviews can shed more light on some of the empirical evidence to minimise failure in implementing future projects, while improving on areas that seem effective in empowering communities.

The main aim of the paper is to present a systematic review of the qualitative evidence of a small collection of studies that highlight the beneficiaries' experiences of income-generating projects by addressing the following questions: in what ways did the beneficiaries describe how their lives have been impacted by participating in income-generating projects in their communities? How did the beneficiaries perceive income-generating projects as "people-centred" economic development initiatives that placed a high value on realising their best interests? In what ways did the beneficiaries describe the impact of income-generating projects in terms of expanding their horizon? The contextualisation of the research topic will be followed by an overview of the methodology. The methodology section is followed by an analysis of the findings according to three main themes. A thematic synthesis of studies on income-generating projects implemented from 2007 to 2012 in parts of Gauteng, Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa), can therefore be realised.

The methods section describes the systematic review of the qualitative evidence, the body of research that is brought together in a systematic review, and concludes by noting some of the significant gaps in the methodology and the research evidence under review.

## CONTEXTUALISATION

One of the most salient features of contemporary society is a greater emphasis on accountability and transparency. One of the ways that confidence in social development can be earned is through the type of evidence that focuses on "what works" in terms of intervention impact. Government and civil society agencies are compelled by the demand to unambiguously show an impact to collate, and review available evidence, especially scientific evidence (Hlongwa & Hlongwana, 2020; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). It is with this view that this paper attempts to thematically synthesise the qualitative evidence that emanates from the research studies on income-generating projects that were conducted in low-income communities over a five-year period from 2007 to 2012.

A systematic review of studies from 2007 to 2012 aims not only to contribute empirically to Lombard's (2008) 10-year review of the implementation of the recommendations of the White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997), but also to test a method, i.e. thematic synthesis, to evaluate the developmental approach through a systematic review of studies on income generation conducted between 2017 and 2022. The significance of the 2007 to 2012 period is *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 2022: 58(4)

that it marks a decade since the social development approach became official policy. Such an analysis will hopefully present the findings from the thematic synthesis of the qualitative evidence as baseline data (collected 10 years since the adoption of the White Paper for Social Welfare in 1997), that can be used in evaluating progress in implementing social development, over 24 years since the White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997). A method to empirically review the research evidence has the potential to offer a crucial perspective into the success of the developmental approach in delivering on socio-economic goals. This article is therefore part of a series of articles that will assist in evaluating the progress of social development at a ten-yearly interval since it became official policy in 1997.

Despite an impressive social wage regime, intensifying poverty associated with growing unemployment and stagnant economic growth threatens the foundations of society. According to Plagerson (2021), although many poor households have benefited from the social wage in the form of free primary health care, no-fee-paying schools, old age and child support grants, housing, and free basic services (water, electricity and sanitation), high levels of poverty, inequality and unemployment continue to be a daily reality for many.

Raniga (2018:396) states that

*It is commendable that legislation has been put in place to create a thriving and inclusive local economy that would address community resources and needs, and contribute to meeting national development goals such as economic growth and poverty eradication.*

However, a Quarterly Labour Force Survey (Statistics South Africa, 2021) of the first quarter of 2021 reported that 46,3% of young people aged 15-34 did not have a job. Under the expanded definition of unemployment that includes those who are discouraged and not actively pursuing job opportunities, the rate of youth unemployment is 74.7% (Statistics South Africa, 2021). A World Bank Report on Inequality in Southern Africa (2022) interprets the current state of poverty, unemployment and inequality through a Gini coefficient of 69. A Gini coefficient of 69 means the top 10% of the population own 71% of the wealth, while the bottom 60% own only 7%.

Income-generation aims to mitigate the impact of social exclusion and address poverty by going beyond the social wage. Social exclusion can be defined as “a state in which individuals are unable to participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life, as well as the process leading to and sustaining such a state” (Plagerson, 2021). While the social wage and protection system has proved to be effective in ameliorating poverty and most of the associated effects such as poor health, lack of access to education, illiteracy, housing, etc., in theory income-generating programmes in poor communities seem to possess more potential to address the root causes of poverty by cultivating a much wider tax base through more inclusive economic growth.

## **METHODS**

Table 1 details the studies included in the synthesis, which are analysed against the title and themes discussed in the paper. Systematic review methods were used to locate, critically

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appraise and synthesise studies that applied qualitative data-collection techniques (all the studies used face-to-face interviews) with low-income beneficiaries of income-generation projects. Contrary to a traditional literature review, a systematic review is more transparent, minimises researcher bias, and provides a “bigger picture” of the evidence that is synthesised from primary research studies (Hawker, Payne, Kerr, Hardey & Powell, 2002; Kearney, 2001; Petticrew, 2001; Varcoe, Rodney & McCormick, 2003). Such a synthesis will facilitate a broader and contextualised understanding of a topic, identify common threads across studies, or enable the development of formal theory (Kearney, 2001; Varcoe *et al.*, 2003). Thematic synthesis was used to construct a qualitative line of argument. Thematic analysis is an established method that uses techniques commonly used to formalise the identification and development of themes (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

The proposed systematic review will be conducted in accordance with the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) methodology for systematic reviews of qualitative evidence (Hlongwa & Hlongwana, 2020). *Stage 1* of the review included sourcing 88 pieces of literature using a combination of electronic database searching, expert opinion and citation searching. *Stage 2* of the review included applying pre-set inclusion and exclusion criteria for compiling a list of studies that are relevant. *Stage 3* of the review involved refining the initial list of studies by a second reviewer as a way of confirming the validity of the inclusion and exclusion criteria for enhancing a higher level of “rater” reliability. “Rater” reliability is aimed at minimising the reviewer’s subjectivity and bias, by using a second reviewer to independently confirm whether the same set of studies short-listed by the first reviewer are included in the final analysis using the inclusion and exclusion criteria. *Stage 4* of the review was a quality appraisal of the final list of studies using a checklist which is guided by models of assessing qualitative research (May & Pope, 2000; Popay, Rogers & Williams, 1998; Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis & Dillon, 2003).

The checklist was divided into 10 main sections - research background, aims and objectives, study context, appropriateness of design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, reflexivity, contribution to knowledge, and the research ethics required of each study. An experienced researcher then independently graded the studies on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 refers to most satisfactory and 5 refers to least satisfactory. Studies graded 1 to 4 were included in the main meta-synthesis; those graded 5 were excluded. The reviewer ended with five studies to conduct a systematic review. In summary, thematic synthesis has three stages: the coding of text line-by-line; the development of descriptive themes; and the generation of analytical themes (Thomas & Harden, 2008; Tong, Palmer, Craig & Strippoli, 2016).

The thematic synthesis of the qualitative studies in income-generation enabled the reviewer to group commonly recurring topics across the studies included in the review. The commonly recurring topics emerged as sub-themes are indicated in the next section to present and discuss the findings. Conducting thematic synthesis in this manner allowed the reviewer to stay close to the results of the primary studies, “synthesising them in a transparent way, and facilitating the explicit production of new concepts and hypotheses” (Thomas & Harden, 2008: 1).

In addition, a computer software program, ATLAS.ti, was used for data management, for example to store, group and retrieve codes. A weakness of the method selected for the review included variations in the quality of the selected studies, which is a common problem that Sandelowski, Dochery and Emden (1997) have substantially analysed. In order to minimise the effect of this weakness, an experienced researcher independently graded the final list of income-generating studies on a scale from 1 to 5, as previously discussed.

**Table 1: Studies included in the systematic review**

	<b>Menyuko (2011)</b>	<b>Mudau &amp; Netshandama (2012)</b>	<b>Kim <i>et al.</i> (2007)</b>	<b>Toby (2011)</b>	<b>Nkosi (2010)</b>	<b>Nkosi (2012)</b>
<b>Aim of study</b>	To explore and describe the experiences of people who participate in income generating projects	To determine if the government funded income generation yields intended results and create job opportunities	To understand how women empowerment reduces incidences of intimate partner violence	To assess the impact of a developmental programme on the socio-economic status	To understand the impact of income-generating projects on women	To assess the impact of the flagship programme on poverty alleviation
<b>Sample no.</b>	08	108	46	80	20	20
<b>Sample type</b>	Low-income participants in NPO/NGO projects	Low-income beneficiaries of food security projects	Low-income women beneficiaries of a micro-finance project	Low-income residents who participated in a developmental programme	Low-income women beneficiaries of an income-generating project	Low-income women beneficiaries of the flagship programme
<b>Age</b>	24-55	25-66	18-75	18-70	18-65	18-50
<b>Data</b>	Semi-structured interviews	Self-administered questionnaires & structured interviews	Semi-structured interviews	Structured & unstructured questionnaires, in-depth interviews & focus group discussion	Semi-structured interviews	Semi-structured interviews
<b>Context</b>	Pretoria, Atteridgeville, low-income urban area	Limpopo province, low-income rural area	Limpopo province, low-income rural area	KwaZulu-Natal, UMhlatuze, low-income rural area	KwaZulu-Natal, Utrecht, low-income rural area	KwaZulu-Natal, Msinga, low-income rural area

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The themes that emerged from the systematic review reveal that earning a higher income is not the sole facet of the impact of participation in income-generation projects, but they also open up a wider set of social advantages. In order to benefit from a wider set of advantages, the beneficiaries of income-generating projects are required to actively participate in all the crucial capacity-development opportunities presented for self-development. Despite a degree of personal development that was on offer, some of the beneficiaries expressed concern about whether they had acquired enough administrative and project management knowledge and skills to independently run, and sustain income-generating projects beyond the research studies.

### Accounts related to participation

A crucial theme of the review in terms of how participation in income-generating projects was experienced by some research participants centred around the importance of empowerment approaches to development. This is based on a sense of justice and equality in relation to people, as well as on ideas that individuals have. It is also built on a set of entitlements which the state is responsible for advancing, promoting and protecting (World Bank, 2022). Nkosi (2012) and Toby (2011), reported on participation in development and empowerment initiatives that women and children benefit from in many ways, as does the community at large in terms of electricity, access roads and water. They received funding from various donors, both private and public. All the women in the project were trained in various skills. This further translated into more children attending early childhood development programmes and they tended to eat every day. Overall, the evidence suggests that merely being involved improved income level, which is a significant contributor to the participation of people in developmental programmes (Mudau & Netshandama, 2012; Nkosi, 2010; Nkosi, 2012; Toby, 2011).

For participation to be enhanced, especially among socially excluded groups, communication at community level must be promoted in terms of empowerment approaches to development, as these examples, from other research, indicate:

*I got interested in being part of the gardening project... because I need to assist my husband in feeding the children ...but at least I sometimes bring home bread and vegetables (Menyuko, 2011: 76).*

*When I heard about the Home-Based Care Project (HBCP), I joined the local HBCP and started getting a stipend, my life changed (Menyuko, 2011: 80).*

According to Menyuko (2011), Mudau and Netshandama (2012), and Nkosi (2010), the impact of participation does not always translate into the intended empowerment through skills development and more income, as there was evidence that various factors motivate people to join and remain in community development projects. Larger and more complex quantitative and qualitative systematic reviews are required to confirm the impact of participation in income-generating projects in low-income communities. The studies under systematic review were too few to enable generalisation of the impact of income-generating projects on the participation of low-income beneficiaries.

A set of themes that applies across the studies under review implies that participation in income generating projects can be improved. There is a recognition of the importance of intersectoral collaboration and the training of the project members as important tools towards the sustainability of the project and comprehensive service delivery (Menyuko, 2011; Mudau & Netshandama, 2012; Nkosi, 2012; Toby, 2011). Taken together, these studies suggests that, for participation to lead to higher income-generation and improved quality of life:

*all participants must be informed and must hear and respect the viewpoints of others, so that together they can make decisions that meet the specific needs within the realities and constraints of the situations (Galvin, Colvin, Robbins & Eales, 2009:14).*

### **People-centred development**

People-centred development is an approach to development that focuses on improving local communities' self-reliance, social justice and participatory decision-making (Human Development Report, 2021). In a study conducted in a low-income community in Limpopo, by Kim, Watts, Hagreaves, Ndlovu, Phetla, Morison, Busza, Porter and Pronyk (2007), people-centred development is associated with improvements in all of the most critical indicators of empowerment. Namely, there were reductions in violence, with a range of responses indicating that women felt enabled to challenge the acceptability of violence, to expect and receive better treatment from partners, to leave abusive relationships, and to raise public awareness about intimate partner violence (Kim *et al.*, 2007). It is clear from the systematic review that implementing people-centred development through income-generation projects is no easy feat, despite the important and promising indicators that are reported by Kim *et al.* (2007).

The recurring themes from almost all the studies reveal that people-centred development in income-generating projects in low-income settings relies heavily on developing the capacity of historically excluded groups (Raniga, 2018). Given the history of poor literacy in the most underprivileged communities, studies link (directly and indirectly) people-centred empowerment with capacity building in financial management, training in agricultural activities, basic project management and business plan writing (Kim *et al.*, 2007; Menyuko, 2011; Mudau & Netshandama, 2012; Nkosi, 2012; Toby, 2011). According to Nkosi (2010), the training offered by other government departments, or non-governmental organisations (NGOs), was insufficient to carry out programme activities.

There is a sense from the synthesis of the evidence that the implementation of social development would be difficult in terms of ensuring that income-generating approaches are people-centred. Nkosi's (2012) study presents evidence that community projects have failed to improve the socio-economic standards of poverty-stricken communities. This specific evidence indicates clearly that income-generating strategies and policies are not effective enough in achieving the desired goals of poverty alleviation. The evidence suggests that what actually made programmes for poverty-alleviation ineffective is the lack of tangible results in improving local communities' self-reliance, social justice and participatory decision-making (Mudau & Netshandama, 2012; Nkosi, 2010; Nkosi, 2012; Toby, 2011).

Mudau and Netshandama (2012), Nkosi (2012) Toby (2011), Menyuko (2011) and Kim *et al.* (2007) agree that the main recommendation for future programmes is that participants need to be engaged in the most critical administrative, management and financial aspects, in order to get a true reflection of how income-generating projects operate. Evidence from local and international studies seems to place great emphasis on the assistance and support of NGOs as crucial for the sustainability of projects through genuine participation and sense of ownership by the intended beneficiaries (van Rooyen, Stewart & de Wet, 2012).

### **Expansion of the beneficiaries' horizons**

Across the studies the evidence suggests that although the beneficiaries participated in income-generating projects to benefit financially, there were other advantages such as the expansion of moral support that goes beyond the care that significant others provide (Kim *et al.*, 2007;

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Menyuko, 2011; Toby, 2011). This specific finding is significant in light of the World Bank's (2022) Data Bank survey, which found that more than half of the population (55.5%) was living in poverty, more than 25% had limited life prospects and support as a consequence of their social exclusion.

Some studies suggest that information was critical in expanding the beneficiaries' horizons through inclusive income-generating processes. According to Toby (2011), information dissemination, political tolerance, formation of pressure groups, regular meeting attendance, and provision of supportive policies are factors that would encourage and enhance participation in developmental programmes. This evidence suggests that future programmes should be geared towards practices and policies that encourage and enhance peoples' participation in development programmes.

Training emerges in the systematic review as another option in using income-generating programmes to expand the prospects of the intended beneficiaries. In Nkosi's (2012) and Menyuko's (2011) studies, the impact in terms of future opportunities is mainly attributed to the fact that all the members were trained in various skills, which included project and business management. Business and project management skills were of the outmost importance to most programmes (Kim *et al.*, 2007; Menyuko, 2011; Mudau & Netshandama, 2012; Nkosi, 2012; Toby, 2011). The evidence is silent on whether the skills learned by low-income beneficiaries translated into improvements in the functioning of the projects, for the betterment of the lives of the community as well as sustainability of the programme as a whole.

Challenges and problems in the form of lack of capacity to impart the basic management skills loomed glaringly in most of the income-generation projects. This is a specific theme that appears consistently in Toby's (2011) and Mudau and Netshandama's (2012) research studies. Programmes in skill acquisition, craft, tourism and housing development did not provide clear data that they were successful in alleviating poverty. Moreover, the evidence is that people were not aware of or well informed about such programmes (Mudau & Netshandama, 2012; Toby, 2011). As a direct implication of the ability to expand people's horizons, sustainability challenges applied to issues relating to the initial phase of the project such as lack of a proper feasibility study, capacity issues in terms of age, gender and highest education level passed (Mudau & Netshandama, 2012) meant the impact of income-generating projects over the longer-term remained very doubtful.

The main theme in this section of the systematic review seems to confirm van Rooyen *et al.*'s (2012) assertion that a holistic approach to development at a local level, remains a vision rather than a reality in poor communities.

The evidence from Menyuko's (2011) and Mudau and Netshandama's (2012) studies showing that in some instances community income-generating projects were left to operate on their own without much needed support from government and NGOs is important. Understanding the gaps and weaknesses in the impact of income-generating initiatives on improving the beneficiaries' future prospects is important in shedding light on the types of approaches that do (or do not) seem to work in development programmes. As with the evidence of what seems to work, examining areas of failure and weakness might be critical in providing the kind of *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 2022: 58(4)



empirical evidence that can be useful in tracking the implementation of post-1997 welfare policies.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

This paper sought to draw lessons from the thematic synthesis of the qualitative research studies on income-generating projects. In order to help inform policy, the emerging themes require further analysis through more large-scale quantitative and qualitative systematic reviews. This will allow for comparative studies against the latest research to track the progress in the implementation of social development initiatives by examining whether past and present income-generating projects yield the desired impact. For instance, it will be interesting and insightful to assess the evidence from the thematic synthesis against the evidence such as

*these studies concluded that the monthly income received from the state cash transfers were grossly insufficient to assist women to break the cycle of poverty and to transition from the second economy to the first economy (Raniga, 2018: 395).*

Broader questions about progress in the implementation of the provisions of the White Paper for Social Welfare (1997) can then also be answered in a systematic way.

Several themes from the studies under systematic review seem to point the way forward in terms of areas of development policy refinement and implementation. For instance, the study by Kim *et al.* (2007) has significant implications for women's wellbeing in indicating how income-generation initiatives for women reduced intimate partner violence by more than half. A theme that emerges in the evidence from other studies is that economic and social empowerment of women contributes to reductions in intimate partner violence (Kim *et al.*, 2007; Menyuko, 2011; Nkosi, 2010; Nkosi, 2012; Toby, 2011). This evidence is particularly significant in a deeply patriarchal and unequal society facing health and social problems such as lower life expectancy, higher infant mortality, more crime, higher illiteracy, more commercial sex work, more xenophobia, more substance abuse and lower economic growth, investment and innovation (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).

A qualitative synthesis of key themes from the studies under systematic review emphasises that income-generating projects specifically, and more broadly all other social development principles and approaches, must be strengthened by the adoption of a holistic approach to development at the local level (Kim *et al.*, 2007; Menyuko, 2011; Nkosi, 2010; Nkosi, 2012; Toby, 2011). A holistic approach to development at the local level appears to be most appropriate to tackle challenges faced by low-income communities, especially rural women. Inclusive and holistic approaches require more dedicated research evidence to make sure that policy implementation is rooted in practices and development theories which ensure that beneficiaries participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life. Also, that the process leading to and sustaining such a state is in accordance with the vision expressed by the UN, as affirmed in Plageron's (2021) analysis.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Systematic reviews are critical in tracking the effectiveness of the White Paper for Social Welfare (1997) in alleviating poverty. In the light of the ineffective and unsustainable *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 2022: 58(4)

implementation of economic development programmes (Dipela & Mohapi, 2021; Raniga, 2018), this paper sought to thematically synthesise qualitative research studies to provide baseline data to highlight areas of success and failure. The main themes from the research evidence in turn reveal that communities require project management theories and practices in order to develop the capacity to run their own economic development programmes. While the systematic review that is presented in the paper does not lay out the key elements that will ensure that income-generating projects in particular do indeed generate an income, it attempts to illuminate a method to systematically extract the type of evidence from research studies that will help inform policy in terms of improving the implementation of social development initiatives. Systematic reviews that integrate qualitative and quantitative evidence over a 10-year period going into the future will answer the question of whether the method selected in this paper is scientifically credible, not only in tracking and assessing the implementation of social development programmes, but also in providing the kinds of insights that will strengthen policy development.

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