

Thematically Synthesizing the Qualitative Evidence Reporting the Impact of Poverty Alleviation Programs in Low-income Communities in South Africa: A Review



Madoda Sitsshange

Significant poverty levels raise critical questions about the impact of poverty eradication programs. Literature reviews play a critical role in highlighting impactful and ineffective socio-economic approaches. This article presents a review of nine qualitative studies that were reported between 2006 and 2013 in poor urban, semi-rural, and rural communities in South Africa. The main goal of this paper is to describe how low-income communities were impacted by programs to reduce poverty. Themes on strength-based interventions, participation, and holistic-multidimensional approaches, emerge from the content analysis as the best account of the impact of community-based poverty eradication programs. Due to the qualitative nature of the small sample of studies under review, a thematic synthesis of the qualitative data provides baseline evidence for further research to assess progress in the provision of development programs, and to generate more insight to strengthen evidence-informed approaches to address persistently high rates of poverty.

Keywords: *poverty eradication, community-based programs, thematic synthesis, systematic review, qualitative evidence, social development*

Introduction

A higher rate of poverty indicates that South Africa might not reach the 2030 National Development Plan (NDP) target of reducing poverty-induced hunger to 0 percent (National Development Plan, 2012). The Human Development Report (HDR) presented data showing that 18.9 percent of the population, about 11 million South Africans, live on less than R28 (\$1.90) for a day. In terms of the

Madoda Sitsshange, Department of Social Work, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa and Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Johannesburg, South Africa. He can be contacted at madodasitsshange@gmail.com

Human Development Index, a measurement of equality developed by the United Nations (UN) that ranks countries by analyzing their quality of life against their rate of industrial development, ranked South Africa 114 out of 189 countries due to its declining standard of living and deepening income inequality (Human Development Report, 2022). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, inequality worsened as the country has dropped two levels lower on the index as a result of more than 2 million job losses (Human Development Report, 2022; World Bank, 2022).

Consistent with the statistics that are reported by global development agencies, Statistics South Africa reported that 55.5 percent of the South African population could not afford to meet their basic needs (Stats SA, 2017). In terms of the Gini coefficient index, which measures inequality on a scale from 0 to 1 (where the higher values indicate higher inequality), inequality rose from 0.66 in 1993 to 0.72 in 2006: despite a decrease from 2006 to 0.68 in 2015, South Africa is the most unequal country in the world (Stats SA, 2017). The World Inequality Report presented data showing that in 2014 the richest 10 percent of the population received two-thirds of the national income, while the top 1 percent received 20 percent of the national income (Alvaredo, Chancel, Piketty, Saez, & Zucman, 2018).

Women make up a large percentage of the poor. Compared to male-headed households, poverty is consistently higher in female-headed households. In 2015, poverty was found to be 51.2 percent among female-headed households compared to 31.4 percent in male-headed households (Stats SA, 2019). Gender "...disparities are still predominant in South Africa's labor market with unemployment at 29.5 for women and 26.1 for men" (National Development Agency, 2019:10). In addition to gender inequality, racial disparities continue to define post-apartheid South Africa socio-economic fault lines. While the post-1994 government social and economic transformation policies improved the living conditions of many black South Africans, many still live in poverty. Unemployment rates are 30.5 percent for black Africans and 8 percent for whites. Race still affects the ability to find a job, as well as the wages received once employed (World Bank, 2018).

Literature Review

The reviewer's content analysis of the qualitative studies under review was guided by theoretical perspectives in poverty studies. According to Bradshaw (2007), five main theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive view of the causes, effects, and solutions to poverty: (1) Individual deficiencies, (2) Cultural belief systems that support subcultures in poverty, (3) Political-economic distortions, (4) Geographical disparities, or (5) Cumulative and circumstantial origins.

Theoretical perspectives on poverty that proffer individualistic, systematic, and cyclical explanations are summarized in Table 1 advanced into a variety of multidimensional perspectives that inform contemporary analysis and research. According to Adetoro, Ngidi, and Danso-Abbeam (2023), "a multidimensional approach has been developed to analyze a wide range of multiple

Table 1 Five theories of poverty

Theory	Causes	Effects	Solutions/Interventions/ Programs
Individual	Individual laziness, incompetence, inherent disabilities.	Rewards winners and punish those that don't work hard or are lucky.	Use training and counselling to help poor individuals to overcome poverty. Safety nets to be accessible to the less fortunate.
Cultural	Adoption of values of a sub-culture that is non-productive and contrary to success.	Re-socialization through the formation of new peer groups.	Asset-based community development. Head-start program for after-school leadership development within subculture.
Political-economic structure	Systematic and structural barriers prevent the poor from accessing jobs, health, education, savings, and assets.	Selection criteria directly or indirectly exclude some groups based on a set of political conditions.	Policies to enforce inclusion and empowerment.
Geographic	Socio-economic advantage is heavily determined by geographic location.	Resource distribution and economics of scale as poverty determining factors.	Area redevelopment programs, rural development policies, and urban revitalization.
Cumulative and cyclical	Spirals of poverty are interdependent and strongly related to community dynamics.	Poverty is systematic and related to community cycles and levels of stability.	Periodic community development programs to build assets targeted at addressing individual deficiencies.

Source: Adopted from Bradshaw (2007).

poverty interrelated levels involving severe deprivation of basic human needs, such as health, education, income-generation and living standards”. The Human Development Report (2022) links the concept of multidimensional poverty with a lack of clean water, inadequate access to healthcare services, malnutrition, poor health, and poor housing conditions.

There seem to be definite areas of alignment between the South African social security system and the multidimensional poverty formulation. The Department of Social Development provides comprehensive social assistance programs for indigent individuals and families to access a range of benefits such as cash transfers, food aid, and a range of welfare services. Free basic education, free health care, and free social housing are part of social benefits that are provided by housing, health, and education government departments. A multi-departmental approach that collectively provides a range of poverty reduction programs is consistent with a multidimensional theoretical approach to poverty that is applied on a national scale to address inequality, vulnerability, and urban-to-rural poverty

(Mert & Kadioglu, 2016). Uni-dimensional assessments of poverty that look at monetary value and consumption, in conjunction with broader multi-dimensional approaches that focus on child poverty, early childhood development and literacy, are indicative of a dynamic theory of poverty that incorporates most of the elements in Bradshaw's (2007) theory of poverty which considers individualistic to economic-political factors.

Zizzamia, Schotte, and Leibbrandt (2019) posit the concept of poverty dynamics, as referring to a fluid state where individuals, families, and communities experience cyclical periods of chronic poverty, transient poverty, and vulnerable poverty. In expanding on the poverty dynamics perspective, Schotte, Zizzamia, and Leibbrandt (2018) define fluid and cyclical poverty situations as conditions where the chronic poor are trapped in poverty, the transient poor are classified as below the poverty line but with above-average chances of escaping poverty, and the vulnerable are classified as above the poverty line but with above-average chances of falling into poverty. In terms of the poverty dynamics theory, a considerable share of the South African population can be classified as the transient poor and the vulnerable group, estimated as 27 percent of the population (Zizzamia et al., 2019). The poverty dynamics theory draws attention to the rural and urban working poor as most vulnerable due to economic instability and volatile labor markets, irregular forms of employment, and government incompetence, which makes poverty a constant threat in their daily lives, hence are the largest population group that are beneficiaries of poverty alleviation programs.

Contextualization

Meta-synthesizing several qualitative studies sharing similar themes and methods is a well-tested scientific method for assessing and presenting broader experiences (Graham & Masters-Awatere, 2020), which only some research studies can provide. The overriding aim of this article is to present a review of a small sample of primary research studies, that apply qualitative procedures to report data on the impact of poverty eradication programs, by addressing the following questions: In what ways did beneficiaries of community-based poverty eradication programs describe, in their own words, their impact? How did the beneficiaries of poverty eradication programs perceive the extent to which their living conditions improved because of poverty eradication programs?

The two research questions that guide the content analysis of qualitative studies are aimed at highlighting practices and approaches that are associated with positive and negative program outcomes. A review that focuses on program impact might contribute to the knowledge that the implementers of social development interventions need to strengthen the provision of poverty eradication programs. Global, regional, national, and/or local poverty eradication program providers require analysis of program impact to reduce high rates of poverty. Drawing key lessons from systematic reviews, using a review of literature in the paper is in line with the consensus in the research literature that (reviews) play

an important role in documenting and disseminating scientific evidence on the impact of programs (Hlongwa & Hlongwana, 2020; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006).

A review of poverty eradication programs implemented between 2006 and 2013 is intended to contribute to Lombard's (2008) 10-year review of the implementation of the White Paper for Social Welfare (1997). The reviewer's intention in presenting a thematic synthesis of studies focusing on poverty eradication is motivated by a need to provide another perspective on the progress of the social development approach by addressing both the root causes and effects of poverty.

Methodology

A thematic synthesis of qualitative studies on poverty eradication is guided by the question: How were the intended beneficiaries impacted by community-based poverty eradication programs? In addressing the research question, the reviewer sought to highlight themes and trends that may assist in reporting progress in the implementation of social development approaches.

The following keywords in the research report titles, abstracts, keywords, and text, guided the search for qualitative studies: "poverty/poverty-eradication/poverty-alleviation/poverty-reduction/anti-poverty", "social exclusion", "community-based program(s)/project(s)", and "program/project impact". The reviewer sourced relevant literature through an electronic search using the following databases: Social Science Citation Index on the Web of Science, Google Scholar, and the Social Science Database. A desktop internet search formed a critical part of the search, and some unpublished studies were accessed through the expert opinion of social development researchers. An online search of research reports in development studies, economics, social work, social development, politics, public health, sociology, psychology, and related social sciences and/or humanities disciplines, formed an essential part of the desktop internet search. Peer-reviewed online scientific publications were also examined. University websites were also searched for unpublished dissertations and technical research reports that focus on poverty eradication programs.

The entire search yielded studies that were reported during 2006–2013. This 10-year period is crucial for tracking and assessing progress since the social development approach became official policy, through the White Paper for Social Welfare (1997). The search for qualitative studies produced 76 research reports. The reviewer screened the 76 research studies using the inclusion and exclusion criteria, as presented in Table 2.

After a comprehensive search of the literature, the reviewer applied the inclusion and exclusion criteria on the titles, abstracts, keywords, and text of the 76 reports to remove excluded and duplicated reports. While this is a review of literature, the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-analysis Protocols (PRISMA-P) (Shamseer et al., 2015) was applied by the reviewer, to explain the process used to arrive at studies selected for thematic synthesis, as outlined in Figure 1.

Table 2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directly related to community-based poverty eradication programs. • Studies using qualitative methods. • Studies conducted in South Africa. • Formally approved research with ethical clearance and/or peer-reviewed. • Formal research studies with clear research topic/theme, question(s), objective(s), methodology, findings, conclusions, and recommendations. • Studies published between 2006 and 2013. • Written in English. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irrelevant to community-based poverty eradication programs. • Studies not using qualitative methods. • Studies not conducted in South Africa. • Not peer-reviewed and/or without ethical clearance. • Publications without a clear research topic, question(s), objective(s), methodology, findings, conclusions, and recommendations. • Studies not published between 2006 and 2013. • Not written in English.

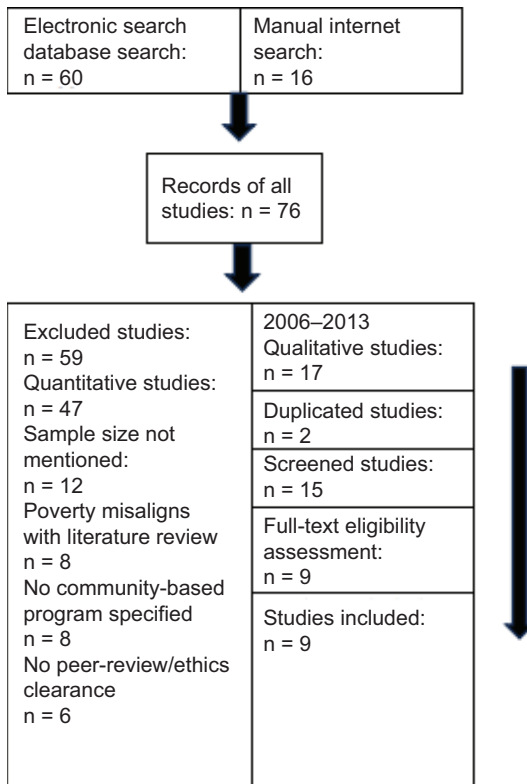


Figure 1 Systematic review process-map.

Of the 76 studies, 16 studies were sourced through a desktop internet search, while an electronic database search yielded 60 studies. Of the 76 studies that represent data on issues related to poverty eradication, social exclusion, and community-based programs, 59 were excluded: 47 mainly because they are quantitative studies, eight use poverty definitions that are inconsistent with the literature review, another set of eight studies did not report the impact of community-based programs, while six studies neither indicate whether ethics clearance was obtained nor peer-review was conducted. Of the 17 studies that complied with the inclusion criteria, further screening narrowed down the number to 15, because two studies were duplicates. After further full-text eligibility assessment, the reviewer narrowed down the number to nine short-listed studies. After re-applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria on the short-listed studies, the reviewer arrived at nine final qualitative studies to be reviewed.

A blind procedure, where a second reviewer, without knowledge of the nine short-listed studies, repeated the process-map that is outlined above, by applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria to the 76 selected studies. The second reviewer confirmed the suitability of the nine studies selected for inclusion in the systematic review. All the included studies were debated to address any inconsistencies and areas of ambiguity as far as the inclusion and exclusion criteria required, and whether the processing of studies through the process-map was standardized and replicable. All nine studies listed in Table 2 are included mainly because of three factors: they all address “poverty/poverty-eradication/poverty-alleviation/poverty-reduction/anti-poverty”, “social exclusion”, “community-based program(s)/project(s)”, present qualitative data, and underwent ethics clearance or were peer-reviewed. Adato, Carter, and May (2006) explore household poverty traps and social exclusion. Mashau (2006) and Nkosi (2010) investigate the poverty situation and the impact of a strategy for poverty alleviation in rural and urban areas, while Van der Merwe (2006) provides a description and analysis of the very personal, subjective experience of poverty by Afrikaans-speaking people.

Stephen (2008), explores factors that might have an impact on the communities’ anti-poverty projects. The study focuses on four projects: two agricultural projects and two non-agricultural projects. Blaauw, Viljoen, and Schenck’s (2011) study sought to determine the prevalence of child-headed households in Gauteng in order to establish a database and to ensure access to aid programs by needy child-headed households. Strydom, Wessels, and Strydom’s (2010) study assesses the effects of health issues and poverty on families in rural areas. Kaeana and Ross (2012) investigated beneficiaries’ perceptions of income-generating projects as alleviators or perpetrators of poverty, and lastly, Sikrweqe (2013) assessed whether a local program contributed towards achieving the goals of poverty reduction.

Table 3 further outlines the sample number and type, the age range of the participants, data collection procedures, and the geographical locations where each study was conducted. All the studies present qualitative data. A study with the smallest sample number reported four participants and a study with the largest

Table 3 Studies included in the systematic review.

Publication	Aim of study	Sample size	Sample type	Age	Data	Context
Adato et al. (2006)	Explores household poverty traps and social exclusion	50 households	Poorest households in rural, semi-urban, and urban areas	Not specified	In-depth, semi-structured interviews	KwaZulu-Natal
Mashau (2006)	To investigate the poverty situation and outline a strategy for poverty alleviation in the rural area of Mashau	118 households	Key role-players	18–21	In-depth, semi-structured interviews	Limpopo Province, Mashau Village
Van der Merwe (2006)	To provide a description and analysis of the very personal, subjective experience of poverty by this group of Afrikaans-speaking people	4 households	Residents of a shelter for destitute individuals and families	Not specified	Individual unstructured interviews	Vaal Triangle, Southern Gauteng
Stephen (2008)	To explore factors that might have an impact on the communities' anti-poverty projects. The study focuses on four projects: two agricultural projects and two non-agricultural projects	49 households	Members of a community-based program	18–35	Self-administered questionnaires and structured interviews	Limpopo Province, Ga-Molepo
Strydom et al. (2010)	To assess the effects of health issues and poverty on families in rural areas.	700 households	Low-income residents	Not specified	Semi-structured interviews	Northern Cape, in Heuningvlei
Nkosi (2010)	To assess the impact of the Mashunka Flagship project as an approach to poverty alleviation	20 households	Members of the Mashunka flagship program	18–50	In-depth interviews	KwaZulu-Natal, Masinga Municipality
Blaauw et al. (2011)	To determine the prevalence of child-headed households in Gauteng in order to establish a database and to ensure access to aid programs by needy child-headed households	61 households	Residents of Gauteng	Not specified	Semi-structured interviews and questionnaires	Gauteng Province
Kaeana & Ross (2012)	To investigate beneficiaries' perceptions of income-generating projects as alleviators or perpetrators of poverty	20 households	Beneficiaries of an income-generating project	20–60	Semi-structured interviews	Sedibeng, Gauteng Province
Sikweqe (2013)	To establish whether KSD municipality's IDP contributes towards achieving the goals of poverty reduction	20 households	Residents and municipal directors	30–49	Questionnaire and semi-structured interviews	Eastern Cape, King Sabata Dalindyebo

sample size reported 700 participants. The age range of the respondents in all nine studies fell within the 18–60 bracket. All the studies ($n = 9$) interviewed people living and working in underprivileged communities. An overview of geographical areas where the qualitative data were collected shows that the studies were collected in five provinces in South Africa: Gauteng ($n = 3$), KwaZulu-Natal ($n = 2$), Limpopo ($n = 2$), Northern Cape ($n = 1$), and the Eastern Cape ($n = 1$).

Guided by relevant theoretical perspectives in poverty, social development, and community-based programs, the reviewer content analyzed the studies by coding of text “line-by-line”; followed by the development of “descriptive themes”; and lastly, the generation of “analytical themes” (Thomas & Harden, 2008; Tong, Palmer, Craig, & Strippoli, 2016). “Thematic analysis” completed the identification and confirmation of emerging themes (Thomas & Harden, 2008), and allowed the reviewer to present the qualitative evidence directly from the studies under review. The procedure that was followed by the reviewer enabled explicit translation of the qualitative data by “...synthesizing them in a transparent way, and facilitating the explicit production of new concepts and hypotheses” (Thomas & Harden, 2008, p. 1).

Results and Discussion

A Thematic Synthesis of 2006 to 2013 Qualitative Studies on the Impact of Community-based Women Empowerment Programs

The discussion of findings is presented under three themes: strength-based interventions, participation, and holistic, multi-dimensional approaches. Guided by the literature on poverty eradication, social exclusion, and community-based programs, a comprehensive content analysis of the qualitative data from the studies selected for review enabled the extraction and presentation of the following discussion of the research results.

Strength-based interventions

A content analysis of community-based poverty eradication programs shows that developing the strength of indigent individuals and families is crucial. Strydom et al.'s (2010) study highlights the importance of linkages between the well-being and happiness of beneficiaries and social services providers' acceptance and enhancement of their (i.e., beneficiaries of poverty-eradication programs) strengths, and material and human resources. The impact of programs, in other words, will be greatly enhanced by leveraging underutilized personal and group coping and survival capabilities. Leveraging underutilized coping and survival capabilities might sustain the structure and functioning of indigent individuals, families, and communities (Strydom et al., 2010). In an urban setting, Van der Merwe (2006, p.141) posits that psychosocial programs “...need to capitalise on existing strengths and cultivate new personal strengths such as

self-confidence, creativity, and capacity for hard work, self-determination, optimism and faith”.

Authors specifically identify social connections, as opposed to social isolation and social exclusion, as crucial for community-based programs to empower indigent individuals and families, to access income-generating opportunities or to cope better in times of periodical cycles of vulnerability to poverty (Adato et al., 2006; Blaauw et al., 2011; Sikrweqe, 2013; Strydom et al., 2010).

Community-based poverty eradication programs that focus on building the strengths of women and children report a crucial area that social service providers need to focus on. Nkosi's (2010) study found that child-headed and female-headed households went beyond being passive beneficiaries of cash transfers, to using limited savings to access crucial life-skills that translated into increased school attendance, fewer risks of malnutrition, and exposure to abuse. According to Blaauw et al. (2011), school-based poverty eradication programs play a crucial role in improving the socioeconomic circumstances of child-headed households, primarily by directly linking the development of strengths to child-headed households to directly accessing social services and cash-transfers, rather than relying on adults who might abuse the resources. Even though poverty and the scarcity of resources can cause conflict in households, the respondents in Strydom et al.'s (2010) study felt strongly that the family was their important strength. As a strength that poverty eradication programs must build on, authors present data confirming the family as a form of social capital that is best placed to stabilize basic livelihood levels, owing to the observation that families have the capacity to adapt, change, and become closer in times of social and economic shocks (Mashau, 2006; Stephen, 2008).

Gaps in eradicating poverty through the development of individual and family strengths receive great attention in the research literature. According to Adato et al. (2006, p. 226), for individuals and families that are considered to be living below the poverty line, “...social capital at best helps stabilize livelihoods at low levels and does little to promote upward mobility”. Access to programs that provide a combination of assets with financial value, income-generating capabilities, and access to markets to build on assets over time, could sustainably address both the root causes and effects of poverty, and upward social mobility (Adato et al., 2006; Stephen, 2008; Van der Merwe, 2006). Focusing poverty eradication programs on individuals and families has its critical limitations. According to Blaauw et al.'s (2011) post-intervention analysis, 26.2 percent of households cannot support even one person with their total monthly income, while less than 40 percent would be able to support a household of two to three members, with only 11.5 percent able to support a household size of four people, and none of the respondents' households able to support a household size of six members. Holistic and multi-dimensional poverty eradication programs require evidence-informed approaches to supplement and complement strength-based interventions that support individuals, families, and larger communities.

Participation

Participation allowed the beneficiaries of community-based poverty eradication programs to highlight progress and identify gaps in service delivery (Kaeana & Ross, 2012). Sikrweqe's (2013) study echoes the theme of opening program monitoring and evaluating the voices of the beneficiaries, by presenting data showing that ward committees went beyond improving the participation of beneficiaries, and ensuring that the beneficiaries directly influence decisions about future developments in the neighborhood. The ability of ordinary members of society to influence decisions about development issues deepens democratic practices and governance (Sikrweqe, 2013). Mashau's (2006) assessment of a flagship local job creation project, highlights a human-centered approach to a collaborative approach to poverty eradication, that brought together the combined strengths of all key stakeholders, ordinary community members, government officials, business people, and non-governmental and faith-based organizations.

At a more practical level, Van der Merwe's (2006) study emphasizes that, where possible, the beneficiaries must participate in all important areas and phases of program implementation to promote the type of community ownership that will invest in long-term sustainability. In recognition that participation in community-based poverty eradication programs is easier said than done, authors recommend further in-depth research analysis of the impact of participation on the outcomes of poverty eradication programs (Blaauw et al., 2011; Kaeana & Ross, 2012; Mashau, 2006; Nkosi, 2010; Stephen, 2008; Van der Merwe, 2006). According to Stephen (2008), least participatory programs tended to have pensioners as the majority of beneficiaries, thereby sensitizing social service providers to be more realistic and strategic in customizing models of participation to be more consistent with the capabilities of the intended beneficiaries.

The main conclusion in Kaeana and Ross's (2012) study is that income-generating projects achieved their aims to some extent, but there were areas of improvement in terms of the participation of beneficiaries in decision-making. In reiterating the theme of the importance and limitations of participation, Adato et al. (2006) assert that while the impact of the beneficiaries' participation in poverty eradication programs cannot be denied, there is no compelling evidence that community participation in poverty eradication translated directly into economic advancement and the accumulation of assets with long-term financial value. The link between the level of beneficiary participation in program processes to the reduction of poverty appears to be complex and still to be sufficiently examined, especially when participation occurs within holistic and multi-dimensional approaches.

Holistic and multi-dimensional approaches

A comprehensive and integrated research-informed approach to establish a local and contextually grounded database, according to Blaauw et al. (2011) and

Strydom et al. (2010), sets a standard for poverty to be addressed as the main target of health, development, education, employment creation, and environmental programs. A holistic, multi-disciplinary, and multi-dimensional approach to poverty eradication could be more impactful, in respect of the data that shows that poverty mainly manifests itself in the deprivation of income-generating opportunities, housing, lack of clean water, sanitation, health services, electricity, literacy, public infrastructure, and so on (Mashau, 2006; Sikrweqe, 2012; Stephen, 2008; Strydom et al., 2010).

According to Kaeana and Ross's (2012) study, a holistic and multi-pronged approach to poverty eradication needs to integrate income generation and employment creation, the provision of social and physical infrastructure including clinics and schools, measures to address social exclusion and institutionalized racism, xenophobia and sexism, the promotion of sustainable livelihoods, and the dissemination of the type of knowledge and skills that fosters human development at the community level. Community-based programs to raise awareness, through education and skills development are central themes that are frequently reported by the studies under review. For instance, more impactful community-based poverty eradication programs had more beneficiaries with secondary school education, while the worst performing were fewer (Blaauw et al., 2011; Mashau, 2006; Nkosi, 2010; Van Der Merwe, 2006).

Deeper structural changes require innovative and novel approaches in light of growing levels of poverty, unemployment, and socio-economic inequality. According to some authors, the broader problem of "...poverty alleviation seems unlikely to be resolved until deeper structural changes make time and markets work more effectively for the broader community of all South Africans" (Adato et al., 2006, p. 245). A theme that cuts across most studies is that current social security programs play a significant role in alleviating poverty, but because of the growing inequality, the social security systems need to be improved to address gaps and shortcomings (Adato et al., 2006; Kaeana & Ross, 2012; Sikrweqe, 2012). The research participants in Nkosi's (2010) study, correctly recommend that gaps and weaknesses in social security programs can be best addressed through inter-sectoral collaborations between governmental and non-governmental service providers, in conjunction with the training of beneficiaries as a key element towards the sustenance of program impact and comprehensive service delivery. The findings are consistent with the assertion that policymakers recognize the integrated approach as more effective in low-middle-income countries (Kumar & Cheng, 2024).

Recommendations

Similar to systematic reviews, literature reviews analyze an ever-growing scope of research on "best practices" for policy-making and policy evaluation (Sundberg & Taylor-Gooby, 2013; Van Rooyen, Steward, & De Wet, 2012). This paper reviews the qualitative evidence to highlight approaches in poverty eradication that

can be inferred as impactful and ineffective, subject to more advanced analysis through large-scale reviews that apply qualitative and quantitative methods. This article recommends further systematic reviews that will analyze studies conducted between 2016 and 2023, to provide a more recent and comprehensive picture of the progress and challenges related to social development programs. Reviews place greater emphasis on transparency and accountability (Thomas & Harden, 2008), by providing an overview of impactful and ineffective approaches that no single study can provide. Themes on beneficiaries' strengths and direct involvement in crucial phases of holistic and multi-multidimensional community-development processes, emerge in the paper as significant to track in forthcoming systematic reviews. Training and research in the three themes outlined above are key areas of focus in assessing progress in the implementation of the social development approach. As noted in a related paper, training "emerges as an important option in expanding the prospects of the intended beneficiaries of community-based programs" (Sitshange, 2022).

Conclusions

Reviews are critical in evaluating the impact of poverty eradication programs. According to the authors, poverty alleviation programs have been ineffective and unsustainable (Dipela & Mohapi, 2021; Raniga, 2018), hence high rates of poverty are consistently reported by statisticians. Reviewers of research studies have a responsibility to beyond painting the impact of poverty through numbers, to highlighting the impact of programs using the voices of community members. The thematic synthesis of qualitative research studies in poverty eradication notes a gap between theory and practice. While laws, policies, and institutions are in place to eradicate poverty, reviews need to empower relevant laws, policies, and institutions to prove impact and sustainability using evidence-based frames of reference. While the review that is presented in the paper is qualitative and limited, it lays a basis for more advanced studies on the impact of poverty eradication programs on individuals and groups.

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