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PARTICIPANTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE EXPANDED PUBLIC WORKS PROGRAMME TO SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS

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Abstract. Public Employment Programmes (PEPs), which include the South African Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), are widely recognised as important social protection tools that address the challenges of persistent unemployment and dire poverty. PEPs offer a 'win-win' policy option by creating jobs while simultaneously generating assets and delivering services. In South Africa, the impact of PEPs has primarily been evaluated based on employment opportunities, thus creating a gap in the comprehensive assessment of their contribution to the broader livelihood of participants beyond job creation. To address this gap, a qualitative research method was employed, utilising a snowball sampling strategy and the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework as the theoretical foundation for the investigation. The findings of this study underscore the positive contribution of the EPWP to the livelihoods of its participants. However, the study also uncovered various challenges confronting the programme, such as non-compliance with program regulations, such as payment below minimum wage rates and difficulties in meeting youth employment targets amidst escalating youth unemployment rates in South Africa. The research recommends introducing a national EPWP policy with enforcement mechanisms and youth-focused programmes while strengthening local institutions to provide services and processes to enhance the impact of these programs and create a conducive environment for beneficiaries to improve their livelihoods and escape poverty.

Keywords: *Public Works Programme, Public Employment Programmes, Sustainable Livelihoods, Youth Unemployment South Africa.*

Abstract. Programele publice de angajare (PEP), care includ Programul extins de lucrări publice din Africa de Sud (EPWP), sunt recunoscute pe scară largă ca instrumente importante de protecție socială care abordează provocările șomajului persistent și sărăciei extreme. PEP-urile oferă o opțiune de politică „câștig-câștig” prin crearea de locuri de muncă și, în același timp, generarea de active și furnizarea de servicii. În Africa de Sud, impactul PEP a fost evaluat în primul rând pe baza oportunităților de angajare, creând astfel un decalaj în evaluarea cuprinzătoare a contribuției acestora la mijloacele de trai mai largi ale participanților dincolo

de crearea de locuri de muncă. Pentru a aborda acest decalaj, a fost folosită o metodă de cercetare calitativă, utilizând o strategie de eşantionare "snowball" și Cadrul pentru mijloacele de trai durabile ca bază teoretică pentru investigație. Concluziile acestui studiu subliniază contribuția pozitivă a EPWP la mijloacele de trai ale participanților săi. Cu toate acestea, studiul a dezvăluit diferite provocări cu care se confruntă programul, cum ar fi nerespectarea regulamentelor programului, plata salariului sub minim și dificultățile în îndeplinirea obiectivelor de ocupare a forței de muncă pentru tineri, pe fondul creșterii ratei șomajului în rândul tinerilor din Africa de Sud. Cercetarea recomandă introducerea unei politici naționale de EPWP cu mecanisme de aplicare și programe axate pe tineri, consolidând în același timp instituțiile locale pentru a furniza servicii și procese, menite de a spori impactul acestor programe și crearea unui mediu propice pentru ca beneficiarii să-și îmbunătățească mijloacele de trai și să scape de sărăcie.

Cuvinte cheie: *program de lucrări publice, programe de angajare publică, mijloace de trai durabile, șomaj în rândul tinerilor din Africa de Sud.*

1. Introduction

Public works or public employment programmes (PWP or PEPs) have long been recognised as a crucial means of contributing to social protection and addressing the challenges of poverty and unemployment [1, p. 38]. Additionally, it is affirmed that PEPs are regarded as a significant and widespread social protection tool during periods of persistent unemployment and dire poverty, providing a 'win-win' policy option through job creation, while ensuring that assets are created and services are delivered to communities [2]. For this inquiry, the terms "public works" and "public employment" programmes are used interchangeably to indicate the same type of job creation interventions. In South Africa, similar to other PEPs globally, the government implements the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), intending to provide work opportunities and income support to poor and unemployed individuals through labour-intensive delivery of public and community assets and services, thereby contributing to development [3]. The EPWP, in its current form, was adopted during the 2003 Growth and Development Summit (GDS) convened by the government with its social partners (business, labor, and civil society). The objectives of the GDS, among other things, included "accelerated investment, job creation, improved efficiency and a fairer distribution of economic opportunities and rewards" [4, p. 3].

South Africa's Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) comprises four distinct sectors, each coordinated by different governmental departments. These sectors include the Infrastructure Sector, the largest sector in the programme concerning work opportunity targets. The Department of Public Works (DPW) is responsible for leading and coordinating all activities within this sector. The key objective of this sector is to promote the use of labour-based approaches in all infrastructure projects where it is economically and practically feasible. The Social Sector, on the other hand, has the least opportunity targets when compared to all other sectors, and is led and coordinated by the Department of Social Development (DSD). This sector focuses on early childhood development programmes and home community-based care initiatives.

The Non-State Sector (NSS) is the second largest sector regarding work opportunity targets within the EPWP. This sector is divided into two main programmes: the Non-Profit Organisation (NPO) Programme, which is coordinated by the DPW, and the Community Work Programme (CWP), which is led by the Department of Cooperative Governance (DCoG). Lastly,

the Environment and Culture Sector (E&C) is the third largest sector in the EPWP concerning work opportunity targets. It is led and coordinated by the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA). The focus of the E&C sector is centred around programmes aimed at protecting the environment, with key initiatives including sustainable energy, parks and beautification, and waste management, among others.

1.1. Statement of the problem and objective of the study

The existing body of literature indicates that the research conducted on Public Employment Programmes (PEPs) in general and the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) in particular, tends to concentrate on the inward-looking and internal effect paradigms of the PEPs for the participants. The inward-looking and internal effect paradigms of PEPs studies focus on the surface-level aspects of the programme that are found in the objectives of the 2004 founding Logical Framework for the EPWP Phase I. The EPWP is designed to achieve the triple objectives of job creation, income transfer, and asset creation for service delivery. The primary objective of studies on the EPWP is to evaluate the programme's impact on these three areas. According to [5], most research on the effect of PEPs in South Africa has concentrated on their contributions to employment or job creation. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the qualitative results on the programme's impact on the participants and their livelihoods in the outward-looking and external effect paradigm of the EPWP. This research seeks to fill this gap by examining the programme's broader impact that extends beyond the narrow view of the programme assessment and evaluation, which solely focuses on number-counting, such as the number of jobs created, kilometres of roads constructed, or the number of bridges built. This study aims to investigate the programme's impact on the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) beneficiaries in terms of their livelihoods.

1.2. Literature review

Over the course of the past three decades, there has been a steady escalation in research conducted on public works programmes (PWPs), including the Employment Promotion Programme (EPP). These studies have explored various facets of the Programme, such as its impact on job creation and the rise in female participation, among other factors. In South Africa (SA), Abedian and Standish [6, p. 87] carried out research on PWPs, with a specific focus on the "merits and demerits" of the programmes in the country. The authors highlighted that, by the mid-1980s, PWPs represented a "new phenomenon" in contemporary SA and, as such, their study aimed to establish guidelines for the implementation of PWPs in the country by drawing on global experiences of PWP implementation in other countries. The study by [6] presented different scenarios to explain why PWPs can fail, while also underscoring why PWPs are important. The authors concluded that the systematic implementation of PWPs as job creation programmes is the only pragmatic option that policymakers can pursue, given the significance and impact of PWPs for the poor and unemployed. It is noteworthy that, even though this study was conducted over 30 years ago, capacity building and skills development remain essential components of the programme.

Since the attainment of democracy in South Africa in 1994, research has been presented to organisations such as the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the HSRC, and the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA), providing an overview of the EPWP and its rationale in the context of unemployment. In contrast to the study by [6], which examines PWPs prior to 1994 when the country was under apartheid, Phillips describes the progression

of PWP in SA [7]. According to [7, p. 32], the implementation of infrastructure projects through the Gundo Lashu Labour-Intensive Roads Maintenance Programme in Limpopo in 2003/2004 resulted in a “600% increase in job creation compared to similar road works projects” that used conventional machine-intensive methods. These results are impressive achievements of the PWP. However, the study did not evaluate the quality outputs of these methods comparably.

The study conducted on assessing Public Works Programmes (PWPs) as a social protection tool, aimed to identify the social protection factors contributing to the success of PWPs as a safety net programme [8]. Their study involved cross-country reviews of PWPs, focusing on their design factors, implementation models, and monitoring and evaluation methods. The authors argued that PWPs serve various objectives, primarily providing poor households with temporary work opportunities to increase their income. This is crucial in achieving individual and family objectives, such as alleviating poverty and covariate and idiosyncratic shocks and serving as a bridge to more stable employment. The authors also highlighted that PWPs indirectly benefit the community, such as creating local assets and infrastructure.

The research conducted by [8] demonstrates that approximately 38% of the 37 Public Works Programmes (PWPs) assessed were established to counteract the negative influence of single covariate shocks, such as natural disasters or macroeconomic crises. In addition, around 27% of the programmes served as an instrument to combat poverty, while 16% were implemented to mitigate seasonal unemployment. The remaining percentage of PWPs had unclear objectives. The authors of the study identified four key design characteristics of PWPs that should be taken into account, including the wage rate, targeting method, funding mechanism, and quality and maintenance. The wage rate is often kept low to deter individuals who are already employed from competing with those who are unemployed and participating in the PWP, as concurred by Mitchell [9]. Self or community targeting is the most widely used method for PWPs, where individuals or households participate based on their personal circumstances or poverty levels. The government, donors can do the funding of PWPs, or a combination of both, such as in the case of Ethiopia’s PSNP. Finally, the provision of high-quality public goods and services in a cost-effective manner should be the principal objective of PWPs, as recommended by [7], to address the issue of inadequate maintenance and quality.

In 2013, a study was conducted in the eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality, which is the third-largest city in South Africa, with a population of over 3.5 million people, to evaluate the effectiveness of a job creation program and the extent to which program participants were able to secure decent employment after completing the program [10]. The study’s objectives align with the 2004 Logical Framework for EPWP Phase I, which seeks to reduce unemployment for at least 1 million individuals, deliver labour-intensive public goods and services at acceptable levels, and improve program beneficiaries’ chances of obtaining sustainable employment through skills development and access to information on local employment and SMME development opportunities.

The EPWP policy implemented by the eThekweni Metropolitan aimed to integrate the programme within the broader policy framework of the Municipality rather than implementing it in isolation. The policy objectives statement reflected this approach, using language that highlights the approval of the Expanded Public Works Programme as a strategy for socio-economic development and the incorporation of the EPWP as a methodology in the implementation of the IDP. The study by [10] revealed that the eThekweni Metropolitan’s

implementation strategy centered on reorienting the municipal line budget function, including capital and maintenance projects, to maximise job creation in accordance with EPWP guidelines. As a result of these initiatives, a labor-intensive methodology is being employed metro-wide, with a focus on providing training and other skills development opportunities, including small business development through accredited learnerships, to unemployed people in communities within the eThekweni Metropolitan.

Employment Promotion Programme (EPWP) has successfully provided employment opportunities to some of its participants, including those who found work within the eThekweni Municipality [10]. However, the study also highlights a notable concern regarding the programme's degeneration into a mere temporary solution for employment. This is an interesting finding, particularly in light of the perspectives presented by [6] and [7], who suggest that public employment programmes (PEPs) can provide short-term employment opportunities and promote socio-economic development in communities. Acknowledging that PEPs alone cannot address the structural issues of unemployment in South Africa, it was emphasized that they should be viewed as one of many short-to-medium term measures aimed at reducing poverty associated with unemployment [7].

1.3. Theoretical framework

This investigation has employed the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) to evaluate the impact of the EPWP's livelihoods on its participants. The concept of SLF, which dates back to the Brundtland Commission on Environment and Development in 1983, has been defined by various scholars worldwide and continues to be refined. According to [11], sustainable livelihoods are defined as "The capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living: A livelihood is sustainable if it can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain and enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihoods for the next generation and which contributes net benefit to other livelihoods at local and global levels and in the short and long term." The SLF has become a widely used framework in community development, primarily to assist in organising the factors that limit or improve livelihood prospects of the poor and vulnerable, as it outlines how these factors are linked to one another. A critical aspect of this framework is recognising that households do not have equal access to livelihood assets, which means they need to make choices and trade-offs. In this study, the focus will be on the livelihood assets (financial capital, human capital, natural capital, physical capital, and social capital), and how the EPWP contributes to sustainable livelihoods of the program participants by examining these five livelihood assets and how the livelihood outcomes are achieved.

2. Materials and Methods

The research methodology employed for evaluating the impact of PEP on rural livelihoods and service delivery necessitated an extensive engagement with research participants within their natural setting and without any intervention or manipulation of variables. By immersing oneself in the group under observation and observing them in their true state, the investigator was able to gain a deeper understanding of their culture, beliefs, and experiences. This qualitative research approach provided a holistic perspective beyond mere quantitative analysis and hypothesis testing. Instead, it delved into the crucial aspects of the study, particularly the social dynamics involved and how the programme impacted the lives of the people involved. Through this approach, the study was able to provide valuable

insights into the human angle of the matter at hand, including the emotions, behaviours, and relationships of the participants.

This investigation was executed during one of the most challenging periods in global history, amid the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak declared a global emergency by the World Health Organization on 3 January 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on both health systems and the worldwide economy, causing nations around the globe to search for solutions to mitigate the disease's disruptive effects on their healthcare and financial systems [12, p. 2].

To curb the spread of the virus in South Africa, the government implemented various crucial and extreme measures, including a nationwide lockdown that began on 26 March 2020. The government continuously reviewed the lockdown levels based on the virus transmission and infection rate. Ethical clearance was obtained in compliance with COVID-19 regulations and adherence to the University of KwaZulu-Natal research guidelines. In an effort to prevent the spread of the infection and comply with government health protocols and regulations regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, telephone interviews were conducted with all research participants.

The question asked aimed to determine the contribution of the EPWP to the livelihoods of the participants/workers, specifically: "In what way were the livelihoods of the programme participants and beneficiaries affected by the implementation of the EPWP?" This inquiry examined the five livelihood assets discussed above.

2.1. Study Site and the population

For this study, two key programmes from the EPWP Infrastructure Sector (Zibambele Road Maintenance Programme and Welisizwe Rural Bridges Programme) were due to their rural-focused. In this study, the population was divided into three categories. The first category was the EPWP workers (generally referred to as EPWP participants, and in this study these terms were used interchangeably) employed in the Programme from the 2019/20 financial year until 2020/21 across all the three targeted provinces: KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), the Eastern Cape (EC), and the Free State (FS) through the eight district municipalities. In KZN, the following district municipalities were selected: Harry Gwala, Ugu, iLembe and King Cetshwayo Municipalities (previously reported or referred to as uThungulu).

These districts were chosen because of the spatial distribution of EPWP projects and the number of work opportunities reported under each district. The EC selected the following districts: Amathole, OR Tambo and Chris Hani District Municipalities. The selection also considered where the bridges and infrastructure were built. The same is true for the FS. Thabo Mofutsanyane District Municipality was selected because this is where the Monatsa Project was implemented.

2.2. Sampling Strategy and Sample Size

For one to be able to generalise findings, significant consideration must be given in choosing a sampling approach and method. Various factors, as noted by [13] were considered when calculating this sample size.

They included the availability of resources to cover the sample, time and cost to cover the sampled population. As a result, the following boundaries and features of the sample applied, Table 1.

Table 1

Sampling Types and Respondent Categories in the Study of EPWP Implementation		
Sampling type	Type of respondents	Number
Category 1 Purposive, non-probability sampling	Officials and managers responsible for the coordination and/or implementation	30
Category 2 Purposive, non-probability sampling	EPWP Coordinators and Champions are officials at municipal levels	32
Category 3 Purposive sampling	Community informants comprised local ward councillors, school principals, church leaders, local business leaders, and other prominent persons	15
Category 3 Snowball sampling	EPWP participants (also referred to as EPWP workers) who were employed or currently working in the programme	25
Total		102

2.3. Data collection and analysis

Various approaches to data collection depend on the nature of a study and the chosen research methodology. According to [14], questionnaires are commonly used in surveys and can be administered in as self-completion questionnaires, direct interviews and phone interviews, where questions are asked over the phone and answers are recorded.

This study took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, requiring adherence to regulations and protocols. Two methods were used to collect data from different participant categories. Firstly, virtual online interactions strategy was applied to officials including managers, coordinators, and EPWP champions (categories 1 and 2). This strategy engaged respondents through the Zoom and Microsoft Teams platform. Secondly, one-on-one interviews were scheduled for EPWP workers (category 1), community informants (category 3), and category 2 members who couldn't participate in focus group discussions for various reasons.

Before collecting data, a formal request was made to the relevant departments and municipalities involved in the study, in accordance with the University's ethical protocols. They were asked to provide a database of potential research participants from the sample. This database served two purposes: keeping records and helping the researcher track progress. After compiling the database, appointments were scheduled to initiate phone contact with the potential participants. The researcher introduced themselves, explained the research project, and invited them to join a virtual focus group discussion. If participants agreed, consent forms and the meeting link were sent via email.

A pilot study was conducted to improve the reliability and validity of data collection instruments and enhance the overall quality of the study. The pilot study involved nine (9) participants chosen based on their proximity to the researcher and their roles in the Programme. Two (2) officials from the National DPWI participated in face-to-face interviews at the Head Office, which adhered to Covid-19 health protocols and social distancing measures. These interviews were recorded for future reference. Two (2) additional participants were interviewed via the online platform Zoom, one from a municipality in KZN and the other from the Provincial DPWI which coordinates the EPWP in the Free State

Province. The third group consisted of three (3) EPWP workers from each targeted province. For participants who were more comfortable with isiZulu, Sotho, or isiXhosa, translations were provided to ensure clarity. The final group included two (2) key informants, a ward councillor from the Free State and a local businessperson from the Eastern Cape Province.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis is defined as the interpretation of the raw research data to make sense and provide meaning to that data in relation to the aim of the study [15, p. 34]. This study used a qualitative research method and followed six phases of thematic analysis to evaluate and compare data, using inductive analyses to integrate qualitative data. Answers were sorted, coded, and classified by emerging themes, which were later assessed, matched, and reviewed. The importance of assigning meaning to qualitative data was emphasized by [16] who highlight the essential role it plays in uncovering insights, understanding phenomena, and informing research findings.

3. Results and Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to critically examine and evaluate the contribution of the EPWP to the livelihoods of the programme participants, under this broad research question “In what way are the livelihoods of the beneficiaries or employees of the EPWP affected by the Programme?” Responding to this study question using the Sustainable Livelihood Framework, five livelihood assets were assessed and discussed below, starting with study demographic information and rate of pay.

3.1 Demographics Information and Rate of Pay

Out of the sample of 25 workers who are involved in the Extended Public Works Programme (EPWP), a majority of 72% (18 individuals) were found to be female, while 28% (7 individuals) were male. Additionally, 44% (11 individuals) of the workers were identified as youths between 18 to 35 years old. These findings indicate that the Programme has exceeded its target for female representation, which was established at 55% as stipulated by [17]. However, the same cannot be said for the Programme’s youth target, as only 44% of the participants were identified as youths. This outcome is particularly worrisome given the current youth unemployment rate in the country, which has been reported by StatsSA (2021) as 63.3% using the expanded definition and 43.6% using the narrow definition. In regard to the rate of pay, 80% of the workers who were interviewed were found to be receiving wages that were below the regulated minimum wage, as stipulated by the Ministerial Determination 4: EPWP 2012 [18] and the 2018 NMW Act, as amended [19]. Furthermore, these workers also experienced a delay in receiving their wages, with payments being received between 3 to 6 weeks after the end of the month.

The non-compliance of the Programme with government regulations pertaining to minimum wage and timely compensation is an issue of concern, particularly when considering the Programme’s objectives of addressing poverty and promoting development. One respondent expressed that ‘the remuneration received from the Programme was inadequate and had remained unchanged for two years’ [P1]. The same individual further requested that the Department increase the wage rate and ensure timely payment to cope with the rise in food prices. Another participant shared their gratitude for the financial support received but appealed to the Department to consider augmenting the wages. As a diabetic individual, the respondent had to make arduous decisions regarding prioritising between

groceries and medication. All of these aspects held significant importance for the participant. Choosing one over the other was not a matter since these items could not be substituted [P2].

The next session discusses the five livelihood assets assessed from the programme participants' point of view.

Financial Capital: Wages and Stipends. All participants interviewed for the study reported a positive improvement in their income levels as a result of the programme, which was particularly significant given that they were all unemployed with no income prior to joining. The programme's objectives include income support, which offers stability and predictability to enable individuals to plan and commit to longer-term financial obligations to enhance their well-being. This was exemplified by participants who were able to make use of lay-by and bank loans to purchase items for their homes and gardens. Access to stable income is important for sustainable livelihoods, as it allows individuals to cope with the stresses and shocks of poverty and bounce back from them. However, it is concerning that most participants were paid less than the regulated minimum wage, which contradicts the programme's objectives of poverty alleviation and development. These findings support previous research that emphasises the importance of sustainable livelihoods that are resilient and able to withstand environmental pressures.

Human Capital: Further Education and Training Attained

The workers interviewed for this study noted that education and training were among the key accomplishments that the Programme contributed to their livelihoods. The Programme's contribution to education was evident at two levels: first, where a participant was directly able to attain education from or through the Programme;

I was able to register for [a] public management short course and paid for my transport costs from the stipend I received. [P3]

and second, where parents or siblings used the money received from the Programme to pay for education.

One participant benefited directly from the Programme by registering for a public management short course and paying for transport costs from the stipend received. Another participant saved part of their wage for their education and planned to use it for registration fees at Durban University of Technology.

Part of the wage that I am receiving, I am saving it for my education. My contract is ending in July 2021. I will be having sufficient registration fee to Durban University of Technology. I am planning to start in the next semester. [P4]

While some participants did not directly attain education through the Programme, they used the money for their children's or siblings' education.

Today, my children are in Grade 12 [and] supported by the money I receive from the programme. I am a single parent with six children and four grandchildren. [P5]

My two daughters are at university. Even though they get NSFAS to support them, but every month, I am able to share with them the little that I receive from the Programme. It makes me feel very good that I do provide for my kids, little as it may be, but I know it goes a long way [for] my children. [P6]

As noted by [20, p.12], a sustainable livelihood is largely dependent on “the availability of assets/livelihood capital”, which are “human capital, natural capital, financial capital and physical capital”. These results indicate that workers or their family members improved their education and skills, enhancing their human capital assets and contributing to their sustainable livelihoods.

3.2. Natural Capital: Land

Natural capital, which refers to the natural assets such as land, plants and other living things, was the subject of discussion during the interviews. It was observed that none of the participants were able to acquire or attain natural capital through income from the EPWP. However, there are instances where participants invested in chicken and animal stock, which also contributes as natural capital.

The reason behind this is mainly attributed to the inadequacy of their income, which is insufficient to cater to other needs beyond the basic necessities. This raises the question of whether asset contributions can actually lead to the development of long-term intergenerational financial security. However, it is worth noting that the majority of the participants hail from villages and reside in communal land under a tribal authority, where land is not freehold.

3.3. Physical Capital: Shelter, Home Renovations, Home Appliances and Electronics

Physical capital, including shelter, home renovations, home appliances, and electronics, plays a crucial role in improving livelihood outcomes. According to [11], any program aiming to improve livelihoods must focus on enhancing means of living. The Program under review helped over 70% of the participants to improve their shelter in various ways such as constructing new structures, renovating, and repairing their homes. For instance, one of the participants noted that they used to buy a bag of cement every month to make bricks, but now, they have completed building a three-roomed house with the income from the Program.

I used to buy a bag of cement every month to make bricks. I have now completed my three-roomed, fully built [house] with the income from the Programme. I now have dignity, as we used to share the same room with my children and others [who] are now old. [P7]

Such improvements provide dignity, particularly for those who previously shared a single room with their children and others. Additionally, participants used the funds to buy fences to protect their gardens from neighbouring livestock.

Through this money, I bought [a] fence and fenced my house and my garden to ensure that livestock from the neighbours do not destroy my garden and produce. I used to lay by the fence and pay monthly until it was fully paid. [P8]

Predictable income from the program allowed some participants to apply for bank loans to buy building materials.

I applied for the bank loan because I had predictable income and bought building material. I am now repaying the bank and staying in my house because I used to stay in a shack with my kids. [P9]

Based on the feedback given by the participants, acquiring housing was a crucial step in enhancing their livelihood outcomes and means of subsistence. This assertion is corroborated by authors who confirm that Public Employment Programmes (PEPs) are deemed to be a viable strategy for achieving livelihood outcomes, and they further observed that “improving well-being involves diverse factors such as minimising the vulnerability of impoverished households” [20, p. 25, 11]. The Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) is an integral component of the Sustainable Livelihood Framework and is implemented by the government to alleviate poverty and joblessness. This initiative generates employment opportunities, transfers income, and provides the workers with the means to construct or enhance their dwellings. This constitutes an important physical asset acquired through the Programme, which enhances the means of subsistence and livelihood outcomes of the EPWP participants. Although the majority (70%) of the interviewees expended a significant proportion of their earnings on constructing and remodelling their homes, acquiring household appliances, furniture, and other personal effects, aside from food, was another key area that all the participants responded positively to, regardless of their age group. Some of the interviewees reported:

Previously, I never had my own bed, but through the earnings I received from the Programme, I was able to purchase a bed for myself, as well as a radio and electric kettle for my family. I also bought a fridge and bed for my family. [P10]

The majority of young people, accounting for over 80%, use a portion of their income to purchase cell phones for personal use, a phenomenon that is not new. It has been previously noted that cellphone technology is important for bringing people together through its ability to facilitate communication and interaction, including calling, texting, and internet connectivity via social media and other platforms. The use of cellphones and smartphones is particularly prevalent among individuals aged 15 to 25 [21]. Furthermore, these devices are essential tools for communication in today's society, with participants in the study revealing that they are used to submit job applications and CVs, communicate with potential clients, and engage with social networks. One participant noted that cell phones a crucial point of contact for clients and potential clients. It is, therefore not surprising that both young and old individuals working in the EPWP program are also investing in these devices for various reasons.

3.4. Social Capital: Improved Social Networks and Support

Social capital refers to assets that extend beyond natural or biological features like water and land, according to [22]. These assets encompass social components, including family, social networks, participation, and human capital, such as knowledge and talents. All participants interviewed credited the Programme with enhancing their social networks and support, which manifested in different forms. For instance, 44% reported establishing social clubs, while the remaining 56% built stronger bonds and relationships with colleagues. Another participant said,

I have started paying my lobola [bride price] for my fiancée I met in the Programme. [P11]

As a result of the programme, participants could interact as humans, share personal experiences and ideas, and discuss various topics of interest, including household matters, men's issues, social events, country affairs, and health issues related to the COVID-19

pandemic. One participant expressed appreciation for the chance to connect with like-minded individuals and engage in intellectually stimulating conversations.

The research participants in the Programme have established their own community and support systems to enhance their social well-being. These social networks assist them in dealing with life shocks and stresses, providing them with a sense of belonging and validation. As noted by [23] human beings by nature crave connection and the feeling of being accepted and cared for. Furthermore, studies have shown that social networks can protect their members against mental and physical health issues, leading to increased happiness and longer lifespans. The results of this study support the notion that social capital is a key sustainable livelihood asset in enhancing the well-being of EPWP participants. The study findings also affirm previous research [23] that social networks can act as shock absorbers for their members during times of distress and anxiety, contributing to their overall well-being and livelihoods.

Further, the study noted the programme's built-in shock absorbers when it comes to the vulnerability context of the project participants, especially, since the study was conducted during the period of covid-19, as participants indicated that they received their stipend during lock-down period. As part of the transforming structures, government issued a directive that the workers of the EPWP be paid during lock-down period to improve their livelihood security and minimise the negative effects of the vulnerability context, in a short to medium term. However, the long term effect of this decision and its sustainability was questioned by many from the policy perspective.

Vulnerability context

The COVID-19 pandemic posed challenges of an unprecedented nature, resulting in the temporary cessation of numerous EPWP projects and the suspension of income due to lockdown regulations. This pandemic has highlighted the weakness of the EPWP initiative against unforeseen disruptions, such as extreme climatic conditions, societal unrest, and pandemics. Such events can disrupt the routine operations of public works programs, rendering it arduous to generate employment opportunities during these times of crisis. Therefore, it is crucial to establish effective measures that enable individuals to cope with unexpected events when the EPWP and other public work programs cannot provide jobs. These measures may comprise social safety nets, emergency funds, skills development programs, and alternative income-generating opportunities. The implementation of these measures by governments can aid in alleviating the detrimental impacts of unforeseen shocks on the employment and income support of those who rely on public works programs.

Transforming structures and processes.

Appropriate transforming structures and processes can maximise their impact of EPWPs on the livelihoods of the participating beneficiaries. Government, especially local government, can provide essential support to beneficiaries of public works programs by enhancing essential services and infrastructure. For example, investing in reliable and efficient transport facilities can improve beneficiaries' access to job opportunities and enable them to commute with ease. Land reform initiatives can also play a significant role by providing secure land tenure and enabling EPWP beneficiaries to engage in agricultural activities for sustenance and income generation. Furthermore, by providing clean water sources and proper sanitation facilities, governments can enhance the overall well-being and health of the beneficiaries. Access to education and healthcare services is equally vital, as it

can help break the cycle of poverty and provide opportunities for skill development and upward mobility. Beneficiaries with access to reliable public services and infrastructure can better allocate their meagre funds from the EPWP towards savings and investments, rather than solely relying on meeting their day-to-day basic needs. This progressive approach can ultimately help lift people out of poverty and create a pathway towards sustainable livelihoods.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, this investigation aimed to assess the EPWP's contribution to the livelihoods of its participants. Employing a qualitative research approach, with the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework as the theoretical backdrop, the study revealed that the EPWP positively impacted the workers, who were the principal beneficiaries of the Programme. This was manifested in the form of income transfer, through wages earned from the Programme, and the enhancement of their skills, which they leveraged within their communities to obtain local employment and augment their income. Moreover, the research showed that the workers were able to improve their food security and acquire critical assets for themselves and their families, such as constructing houses and purchasing useful household appliances, thanks to the wages received through the EPWP. The programme was also shown to enhance the participants' social networks, and some even established social and savings clubs, which provided support during difficult times. These are all crucial sustainable livelihood assets that the EPWP was able to foster through its initiatives. Despite the positive outcomes and impact of the programme on the participants, the study also revealed certain challenges, particularly with respect to the duration of the jobs created by the programme, some of the projects had shorter duration even though you sometimes get re-employed but it is always in a new contract with new terms. Another challenge raised by some participants was that they are paid less than the minimum stipulated wage rate and are forced to take the job because if they are not accepted, one will remain unemployed.

This research has shown that public works programs can face vulnerabilities during unexpected events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It is essential to address these vulnerabilities and support the programs effectively, as it will ensure maximum impact on the livelihoods of beneficiaries.

Transforming structures, including local and other levels of government, play a crucial role in supporting public works programs. Governments, particularly at the local level, can provide support by improving essential services and infrastructure. This can include investing in transport facilities, land reform, water and sanitation, and other public services. By addressing these transforming structures, beneficiaries can allocate funds from the EPWP towards saving and progressively lifting themselves out of poverty.

In conclusion, this study presents several propositions and suggestions to confront the challenges encountered by the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) and to augment its present accomplishments.

- Establishing a comprehensive national policy for EPWP with accompanying enforcement mechanisms is imperative. This policy will address non-compliance issues and further enhance the program's effectiveness.
- To address the issue of high youth unemployment rates, it is recommended that existing programs within EPWP be restructured and new initiatives specifically designed to improve youth participation and create job opportunities for young

individuals be introduced.

- The development of capacity for effective coordination and implementation of EPWP is crucial to ensure that the program can expand its job creation endeavours, especially during the period of high unemployment rates in the country.
- It is suggested that consideration be given to implementing a dedicated payment system for EPWP participants. This system would streamline internal reporting processes within departments, eliminating delays in disbursing beneficiary stipends and ensuring timely payment.
- By investing in infrastructure, services, and processes, governments can enhance the impact of these programs and create a conducive environment for beneficiaries to improve their livelihoods and escape poverty.
- Incorporate, with EPWPs, measures to mitigate the negative impacts of unexpected shocks on the livelihoods of individuals who depend on public works programs for employment and income support.

Overall, the study makes a theoretical contribution to the understanding of public works programs as mechanisms for poverty alleviation, livelihood enhancement, and resilience-building, while also providing practical policy recommendations for program improvement and adaptation to changing socio-economic contexts.

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