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Integrating Rural Economic Development into the Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) Curriculum as a Practice to Ensure Sustainable Livelihoods

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore the integration of rural economic development initiatives and practices into the Adult Basic Education and Training curriculum with a view to leverage the people in rural communities to boost their productivity towards sustainable livelihoods.

Methodology: This study adopted a qualitative approach in which the data was collected through focus group interviews. The participants were sampled from former and current ABET learners and their principal. The interviews were intended to solicit information about their farming project; how they started the farming and whether they were able to feed their families from the sale of their produce.

Findings: The findings from the focus group interviews are that though they had support from the Kruger National Park, they still felt that the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) needed to intervene and make ABET a means for sustainable livelihoods for the beneficiaries.

Unique contribution to public, policy and practice: This study contributed uniquely in the area of policy. The students proposed that the ABET curriculum needed to be restructured to include skills training to enable them to make a living after the ABET encounter.

Keywords: *Economy, Economic Growth, (Rural) Economic Development, Adult Basic Education and Training, Curriculum, Sustainable Livelihoods*

Introduction

The 1994 political breakthrough and the ensuing promises of a better life for all citizens of South Africa continue to ring loud in the minds of people, particularly those from rural communities. This is the case because of the wide socio-economic gap between the citizens in the rural areas and their counterparts in the advantaged and developed parts of the country, thus putting the concepts of economy, economic growth and development on top of social and political discourse today. Furthermore, social, political and economic commentators used economic growth as an instrument to measure the capacity of the government of the day to govern; and any trend to the contrary renders the government incapable of delivering on its mandate of serving and servicing the citizens.

More often, the incapacity of the government to provide for the citizens is more evident in rural communities where the levels of poverty and inequality are high. There are several contributors to the socio-economic gap indicated above and one of them, though not more important than the others, is low or outright lack of education which would provide requisite skills to the citizens to enable them to participate in the local economy. Other contributing factors include limited or no access to basic services such as electricity, water, food security, quality health care, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities.

The introduction of ABET was a step to address illiteracy and to provide skills to the citizenry, though it is not clear if this intervention is living up to its purported purpose and this is part of what this paper sets out to unravel. Chapter 6 of the National Development Plan (NDP) which deals with ‘an integrated and inclusive rural economy’ outlines some key points which outline the expectations of and subsequent course of action by the government to address these expectations.

The NDP commences by acknowledging government’s consciousness of the plight of rural communities in terms of socio-economic and political opportunities to overcome poverty (NDP, p217). Furthermore, the NDP acknowledges that in order to meet the above needs, agricultural development should introduce a land-reform and job-creation or livelihood strategy that would ensure that rural communities have jobs, have access to basic services such as health care, education, and food security. The essence of chapter 6 of the NDP is therefore compatible with the subject matter of this study in that it touches the nerve of rural economic development by suggesting strategies to boost the socio-economic status of people living in rural communities. It is also important to note that the strategies suggested in the NDP are at the core of the definition of the concept of socio-economic status and this concept will be explored further later in the study.

Conceptualization of the main concepts in the study

Adult Basic Education and Training

For official purposes, the Department of Education has defined Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) as the general conceptual foundation towards lifelong learning and development, comprising of knowledge, skills and attitudes required for social, economic and

political participation and transformation applicable to a range of contexts (DoE, RSA). Adult Basic Education has been on top of UNESCO's commitment to a holistic and humanistic vision of quality education worldwide; the realization of everyone's right to education, and the belief that education plays a fundamental role in human, social and economic development (Lineo and Poku, 2016). Similarly, Daniels (2020) the government introduced policies in 2013 which marked the shift of purpose of ABET from providing opportunities for acquiring literacy to the ethnically marginalized adults to being an opportunity for them to acquire qualifications to improve their work opportunities. Contrary to the purpose of the introduction of ABET carried by the definition above, the majority of learners, particularly the elderly, have until the recent past, viewed their participation as a way of learning to read and write. Baatjies and Mathe (2004) trace the development of ABET to a philosophical shift away from emancipatory approach to an instrumentalist one which sought to develop the adult learner as a human resource; meaning that ABET became an instrument to empower the recipients and prepare them for the world of work rather than only emancipating them from illiteracy. The revised curriculum and the proactivity of some leaders in ABET started to explore avenues that would enlighten the learners to look beyond just learning to read and write. Some of these avenues include sourcing land from the tribal authorities and involving the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD) to give agricultural skills to the learners.

It is perhaps worth noting that before 1994, Adult Education and Training (before it was called ABET) was a non-formal education with the goal of providing adult learners with literacy (Daniels, 2020). It was only after 1994 that ABET was formalised and subsequently moved from basic education to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). Given this situation, one would think that it would be prudent for the DHET to look beyond providing a curriculum that would only prepare the students to read and write, and structure a curriculum that would prepare the students for the world of work. The proximity of the DHET with the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) is another avenue which it would exploit to take over the students after completing their levels with ABET. Until now, there is no evidence of that kind of intervention by the DHET, thus making the levels acquired from ABET irrelevant for economic development and guaranteeing the students sustainable livelihoods.

Economy, economic growth, and economic development

This section of the study gives clarity to the meaning of the three concepts which I think need to be clearly understood if this study has to make sense to the reader. The first concept is 'economy.' Many lay people think that economy is synonymous with money, whereas this is not the case. According to James, Magee, Scerri, Steger, and Manfred (2015), an economy is defined as a social domain that emphasizes the practices, discourses, and material expressions associated with the production, use, and management of scarce resources. It involves the production, distribution and trade, as well as consumption of goods and services. A typical example of an economy (a rural economy for the purpose of this study) is the production of farm produce, sold

to a supermarket in the nearby mall, and the immediate benefit to the farmer who feeds his/her family from the income earned.

Economic growth and economic development are two confusing concepts which are often used interchangeably though they do not mean the same thing and their objectives also differ (Meyer, Masehla and Kot, 2017). According to Fourie & Burger (2009) and Cohen (2017), economic development can be defined as a comprehensive integrated process that increases the range of choices of all people and an improvement of the standard of living. It embraces an improvement in human development, and access to employment over and above the increase in income or increase in GDP. Todaro and Smith (2015) define economic development as expansion of the productivity potential and ability of the local economy in the long run, improvement of the quality of life and increased levels of employment, thus leading to short term GDP growth as a result of sustainable inclusive economic growth. Khan and Khan (2012) shared Fourie and Burger's (2009) view about the improvement of people's standard of living by adding that the improvement in the standard of living of a country's population includes factors such as income, health and literacy. These are further supported by Todaro and Smith (2015) who added providing jobs, better education, as well as a wider range of social and economic choices available to individuals as other features of economic development. Economic growth, on the contrary, refers to the increase in the total output of goods and services in an economy over a period of time (Kaushik, 2023). Heller (2012) indicates that economic growth concerns activities which can be expressed in quantitative terms in the economy, while economic development covers a larger scope of activities which includes economic growth and qualitative structural changes in the economy and society, thus making economic development a higher order variable.

Curriculum

According to Mulenga (2018) argued that having an authentic (not claimed or assumed) understanding of a concept such as curriculum is important since a curriculum is the central business of every educational institution. From a claimed and assumed point of view, a curriculum can be easily defined as a set of subjects which are taught in schools but Marsh (2009) rebutted this assumptive definition by indicating that a curriculum is much more than what is confined to a school. Tanner and Tanner (1980) provided a definition of curriculum that portrays it as a dynamic, accommodating, and systematic reconstruction of knowledge and experiences. They defined curriculum as planned and guided learning experiences and intended learning outcomes, formulated through the systematic reconstruction of knowledge and experience, under the auspices of the school, for the learner's continuous and wilful growth in personal-social competence.

Whereas the majority ABET students joined the school with the hope of being prepared for the world of work, this study sets out to establish if the taught curriculum meets their intentions. Tanner and Tanner's definition emphasize that a curriculum must become a lens through which the students would see the past, present and future of the(ir) world.

Sustainable livelihoods

In order to have a better understanding of this concept, it is advisable to first define the component words and then the compound word. According to the WCED (1987), the word ‘sustainable’ refers to the maintenance or enhancement of resource productivity on a long-term basis, while ‘livelihood’ is defined as adequate stocks and flows of food and cash to meet basic needs. Accordingly, a household or community is enabled to gain access to sustainable livelihood through many ways such as land ownership, livestock, trees, and stable employment with adequate remuneration, to mention just a few. Chambers and Conway (1987) provided a definition for sustainable livelihoods which has become the standard for understanding this concept by various development agencies and it holds that: a livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living: a livelihood is sustainable which can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation; and which contributes and net benefits other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the long and short term.

Theoretical Framework

A careful perusal of literature on theories related to development in particular, prompted me to adopt a combination of empowerment and systems theories for this research. The empowerment theory, according to Chukwuma and Olurunfemi (2021:107), refers to the experience of personal growth and an improvement in self-definition that occurs as a result of the development of capabilities and proficiencies. Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) view empowerment as a combination of personal strengths, initiative, and natural helping systems to bring about change. The empowerment theory is credited for bringing about community development through the empowerment of people in the communities to develop their communities.

The systems theory, on the other hand, expresses a concern with the relations among living entities and between entities and other aspects of their environment (Chukwuma and Olorunfemi, 2021). There is a link between the empowerment theory and systems theory in that both attach value to the environment as a vehicle through which community development can be achieved. According to Capra (1997) in Mele, Pels, and Polese (2010) systems theory is an interdisciplinary theory about every system in nature, in society and in many scientific domains as well as a framework with which researchers can investigate phenomena from a holistic approach. I therefore adopted a combination of the two theories because they overlap in terms of their purpose and that they will assist me to unpack the multifaceted subject matter of this study.

Methodology

For the collection of data for this study, I used a qualitative research design where I conducted focus group interviews with eleven respondents who were purposively sampled from current and former ABET students. The sample also included the principal of the ABET centre. The reason for including the principal in the sample is because of her hands on approach in initiating the farming project which would benefit the students financially after completing their ABET levels. The advantage of the qualitative research is that it enables the researcher to explore and

understand the research problem in context, and can also engage with the factors that influence the participants' socio-economic circumstances in this regard.

Respondents

The respondents in this study are eleven people, four of whom are former ABET students employed by the Kruger National Park which deployed them to assist with farming skills, one is the principal of the ABET school and six are former ABET students. I had an honour of having known the principal and the former students because their ABET centre was accommodated in the local primary school where I have been principal for twelve years. I was involved in most of their activities as we discussed from time to time with their principal regarding venues for their assessments, and also their plans to engage the Kruger National Park in their farming project.

Data collection procedures

For the collection of data for this study, I interviewed all of them including the principal in a focus group discussion. The reason for interviewing the principal was primarily to get the background about the acquisition of the farm, how this idea was conceived, and whether there was a link between the ABET curriculum and their farming expedition to sustain the students' livelihoods. The current and former students shared their reasons for joining ABET and explained whether their expectations were met as they navigated through their studies. Another question which was general was whether there was any government support for the farming project; the returns from the farm produce and whether they shared the returns, and their future prospects about the project.

The interaction with the participants took place at the farm, making all of them comfortable and not having to spend time and money to travel to a different venue. All the participants gave their informed consent to participate in the study in line with ethical research practice. I made them aware of their rights such as their voluntary participation in the study, that they were free to opt out of the research if for some reason they felt uncomfortable to proceed. Given the scope of the focus group interviews, I found it unnecessary to record the proceedings and relied on my expertise to write down the responses of the participants as we proceeded with the interviews.

Data analysis

Presentation and interpretation of the results

The principal indicated that the farming project was motivated by the African Conservation Trust (ACT) which is part of the social ecology unit in the Kruger National Park. They were advised to register a cooperative with the Department of Trade and Industry which they did. She indicated that the idea was to provide means of an income for ABET beneficiaries and their children to fight poverty. The role of the ACT was to provide support and training through deployment of trained former ABET students to the farm to assist with training. I had the singular honour of meeting some of the deployed former students on the day of the interviews and they also participated in the focus group interviews.

The current and former students talked passionately about the gaps in their lives which were closed by their engagement in the ABET classes. The former students in the group were in their thirties in terms of age and were proud to indicate that after graduating from ABET, they were given internships by the SANPARKS where they were trained extensively on growing cotton and this was the skill which they were sharing with the others in their farming project. They however, indicated that growing cotton was unusual in the local area as it was a delicate product to farm, and that they were still struggling to go full scale with their cotton farming due to some difficulties related to getting a stable market for their harvests. In order to keep the farm productive and to safeguard it from being grabbed by some local ‘farming mafias,’ they were planting chillies which they sold to local ‘spaza shops’ and they indicated that the market was great. From the proceeds of the sale of the chillies, they were able to share the income equally to provide for their families and still have surplus to buy seedlings.

One elderly female member of the group indicated that she graduated from the ABET centre a number of years ago and she was a farming activist in her area. She further indicated that she joined this group after hearing their plight about a generator to pump water from the river for irrigation. She therefore volunteered to join them and use her generator provided that they provided transport to collect it from her home and return it after every day’s work. Another member of the group who is still attending literacy classes in the ABET centre and working as a volunteer gardener in the school where the ABET centre is situated volunteered to use his mini-truck to transport the generator to and from the fields on the days when it is needed.

Emergent ideas and their compatibility with rural economic development and sustainable livelihoods

The definition of sustainable livelihoods as proposed by Chambers and Conway (1987) was used as a standard to measure the extent to which those who participate in economic development activities are able to provide means of living for themselves and their families in the short and long terms. The engagement of skilled people from the African Conservation Trust to provide training is one primary act that contributes in the enhancement of the capabilities of the workforce, thereby turning them into assets of the farming project. This act has a potential of extending the lifespan of the project to the point of providing livelihoods to the next generation.

It therefore emerged from the analysis of the responses from the focus group interviews that the activities on the farm were in keeping with definition of sustainable livelihoods as provided by Chambers and Conway (1987). It also emerged from the focus group interviews that the farming activities, as a way of participating in the local economy by the participants, contributed to the local economic development because they were exposed to choices with a potential of improving their standard of living in the long term. Though their ABET classes developed them as far as their curriculum content, their partnership with ACT impacted their productivity potential and their quality of life as they started earning an income, and these are the ideals which are found in the definition of economic development as proposed by Burger and Fourie (2009) and Todaro and Smith (2015).

Views on the importance of ABET

Emergent ideas about ABET that transcends the basic idea of just learning to read and write

From the responses of the students, it emerged that while reading and writing was the primary reason for some to enrol in the ABET classes; they also expected that this exercise would expose them to economic activities to enable them to care for their families. However, the absence of skills programmes in the ABET curriculum, McKay (2007) indicated that people with no means of generating income (even after completing their ABET grades) continue to engage in survivalist economic activities. McKay (2007) further brings an analogy that shows a disconnect between what ABET offers with its current curriculum and what it is supposed to offer to the students if all its elements, particularly the ‘training element’ are taken into account. According to McKay (2007), the ABE (Adult Basic Education) refers to the educational base that is required to improve life chances; whereas Adult Basic Training (ABT) refers to the foundational income-generating or occupational skills that individuals require to improve their livelihoods. Given the advanced age of some of the students, coupled with the fact that the curriculum did not provide them with any skills for sustainable livelihoods, the students called for an overhaul of the ABET curriculum. They advocated for a skills based curriculum as proposed by McKay (2007) rather than focussing only on the mainstream learning content that does not prepare them for the world of work. The students indicated that reading and writing alone were not sufficient without prospects of opportunities to provide and sustain their livelihoods.

Student’s experiences and achievement beyond the ABET classroom

Emergent ideas from the ABET students about their successes beyond the classroom

The experiences of the students are not generalizable in that the success of the students or lack thereof depends much on the creativity and proactivity of the leadership of the ABET centre. The students in this centre benefited from their enrolment in this particular ABET centre for three reasons: firstly because the principal of the centre took an initiative and connected with the African Conservation Trust (ACT) which is found in the Kruger National Park; secondly, that the centre is situated closer to an agricultural strip of land along the Sabie River which borders the centre village with the Kruger National Park, and thirdly that the centre already had a hectare of land which was allocated to it a number of years before. The students indicated that the intervention of the DHET through making SETAs available to provide post school support would enable them to sustain their livelihoods. They advocated for post ABET training that would afford them streams of income to support their families. The DHET would be able to do this through its government influence on SETAs to provide post ABET skills development and support for graduating students, and provision of infrastructure and implements (tools) to support the ABET graduates’ initiatives such as farming which is the most common rural economic development initiative today. The ABET teachers are motivated by inputs from UNESCO (1998), and the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI, 1993) who advocated that a crop of well-trained practitioners with skills set to address critical economic, and socio-political problems of learners from both rural and urban, and formal and informal backgrounds. According to these

sources, if the teachers are well trained to understand the circumstances of their students, they can prepare them for work opportunities without their curriculum undergoing any changes.

Conclusion

This study has drawn attention to an issue which has been overlooked for years since the introduction of Adult Basic Education and Training. That is the issue of whether ABET has any significant impact on the improvement of the standard of living of the recipients and whether it improves their development and access to employment opportunities to enable them to participate in the economy and contribute to economic development. There is a significant input towards the future of ABET, which is the suggestion that DHET should consider reviewing the curriculum towards a skills-based one. Having a skills-based curriculum will benefit those who are at an advanced age as they will be armed with skills to establish businesses in order to provide for their families. This latter suggestion is in concert with the basic intention of this study; to integrate economic development activities into the ABET curriculum so that the recipients can participate in the local economy to provide for their families.

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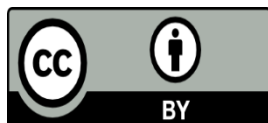
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