



The role of public-private partnerships in promoting youth economic empowerment in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigated the role of public-private partnerships, with a particular focus on the Youth Employment Service (YES) initiative, in promoting youth economic empowerment in South Africa. It delineates the significant challenges associated with youth unemployment and reveals the stark reality in which a considerable segment of the youth demographic encounters various barriers, including lack of experience, educational discrepancies, and economic instability. This research highlights the transformative potential of the YES programme and emphasises its alignment with both local and international development objectives, such as the Sustainable Development Goals. Thematic analysis of data collected from interviews with current participants and alumni of the YES programme indicates that while the programme effectively enhances employability through skills development and work experience, it also confronts challenges arising from inadequate resource allocation, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and the need for improved institutional coordination. Recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of the YES programme, including the facilitation of greater post-employment support, enhancing awareness of the programme among young people, and promoting entrepreneurial initiatives. This study contributes to the discourse on solutions to youth unemployment by illustrating how structured collaborations between the public and private sectors can create sustainable pathways for youth economic engagement.

Contribution/Originality: This research is one of the limited studies on how public-private partnerships (PPPs), such as the Youth Employment Service (YES) programme, address youth unemployment in South Africa. The identified success factors include market/industry alignment, collaboration, and advocating inclusivity. Areas for improvement involve bureaucratic delays, regulatory complexities, and funding constraints.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 1994 democratic elections in South Africa highlighted challenges such as youth unemployment and socio-economic disparities. Despite governmental efforts, a backlog of issues has impeded both public and private sector initiatives aimed at youth development and employment. South Africa faces a pressing need for qualified personnel to drive economic growth (Chitiga, Mabugu, & Maisonnave, 2016). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2014) highlights that a significant portion of the global population is under the age of 29, emphasizing the need for youth to possess the skills required to break the cycle of poverty. In accordance with Cebekhulu (2013), youth is defined as individuals aged 15 to 35.

This definition has led the government to develop the term “youth development/empowerment,” which is critical as young people are regarded as future contributors to national development.

Norton Rose Fulbright (2020) asserts that, despite numerous macro-economic initiatives, South Africa has yet to achieve the growth necessary to reduce youth unemployment after more than 30 years of democracy. Unemployment, exacerbated by the 2008/2009 financial crisis, is linked to social issues such as crime, disease, and poverty. The National Development Plan (NDP) has established ambitious goals to mitigate unemployment; however, progress has been slow, with adverse effects on mental health, development, and well-being. White and Wyn (2004) indicate that, when examining the issue of youth employment from a human development perspective, the South African National Human Development Report (SANHDR) highlights the significance of youth employment in both economic terms and for the advancement of human development.

The aspiration to stimulate economic growth through wealth creation remains the objective of South Africa’s democratic government. It has been observed that young people require a variety of support structures, experiences, and opportunities to realize their full potential in contributing to economic growth. PPPs are regarded as a potential mechanism to address youth unemployment and economic empowerment. In this context, it is essential to evaluate whether the initiatives generated through PPPs benefit all intended participants of the programme. This study posits that the concepts of improved lives and economic empowerment are inextricably linked, which makes this research crucial as it can provide valuable insight into the effectiveness of the YES PPP initiative in tackling youth unemployment while effectively leveraging the strengths of both the public and private sectors (Yescombe, 2007).

The primary aim of this research was to assess the effectiveness of PPPs in addressing youth unemployment. By conducting an exploratory study and collecting relevant data, the researchers sought to enhance current understanding of how PPPs can successfully eliminate unemployment among young individuals in South Africa.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The advent of democracy in South Africa not only heralded a new era of freedom but also introduced significant challenges across various dimensions, one of which is the escalating youth unemployment rate, which has resulted in considerable socio-economic issues. Despite numerous efforts by the government to address this issue, it remains a formidable task due to a historical backlog, which necessitates collaborative initiatives for youth development and employment by both the government and the private sector (Medema, 2019). As a developing nation, South Africa needs qualified and skilled personnel to contribute to economic development. While young individuals possess great potential to facilitate positive change, economic growth, innovation, and resilience, factors such as financial exclusion, limited economic opportunities, and insufficient skills hinder their full contribution to the country’s economic growth and progress (Hamann, Khagram, & Rohan, 2008).

In the aftermath of the democratic elections of 1994, the newly established government faced the critical task of fostering economic growth, promoting development, and addressing social issues and injustices such as the high unemployment rate, poverty, and inequality, while also ensuring stability in South Africa. The democratic election instilled optimism for a significant enhancement of the nation’s economic status, which had suffered a decline during the periods of British colonial rule and apartheid (Chitiga et al., 2016). Furthermore, it contributed to expectations of improved economic prosperity and a reduction in inequality among citizens. The populace anticipated that increased access to education, the acquisition of new skills, and the creation of employment opportunities would alleviate poverty and decrease the unemployment rate (Aron & Harris, 2005).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2014) reports that the global population exceeds 2.9 billion, with approximately 50% being under the age of 29. For nations to disrupt the cycle of poverty, it is essential that young individuals possess the requisite knowledge and skills for success in life. Young people globally, across diverse developmental stages and socio-economic contexts, seek comprehensive engagement in societal participation. Effectively managing these valuable assets and enhancing the quality of their contributions

by mitigating vulnerabilities and risks can create significant differentiation. Cebekhulu (2013) elucidates that recognizing the youth as assets for development at local, regional, national, and international levels underscores a critical distinction for developing countries. Engaging young people in meaningful activities and programmes fosters social cohesion and integrates them into their communities.

This research utilises the definition provided by the National Youth Policy (Department of Women Youth and Persons with Disabilities, 2020), which defines youths as individuals aged between 15 and 35. This definition prompted the state to develop the concept of “youth development/empowerment”, which is crucial as young people are viewed as the future contributors to national development. According to (Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), 2021), approximately 63.3% of the South African population comprises individuals aged between 15 and 34 years. Due to the country’s deepening economic challenges, young people often endure disproportionate hardships. Despite being central to the nation’s development, more than 30% of individuals aged between 15 and 24 are uneducated, untrained, and unemployed, with 46% of those aged between 25 and 34 falling into the same category.

Lakin and Mahoney (2006) contend that several national departments and public agencies in the economic cluster have not adequately prioritized youth economic empowerment in their sector-specific strategies, policies, and programmes. This is particularly concerning as the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition (DTIC) is expected to lead the advancement of youth economic empowerment initiatives across South Africa. There are currently no dedicated budget allocations, quotas, or flexible criteria to address the unique challenges faced by young people and to measure their progress. Consequently, any benefits received, if any, tend to be incidental rather than the result of intentional, well-structured support mechanisms. Moreover, there is a significant gap in the collection and reporting of performance data related to youth economic empowerment across various departments. Without such data, it is challenging to monitor progress, evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, and make informed policy adjustments to enhance youth inclusion in the economy.

Additionally, Mlatsheni and Leibbrandt (2011) highlight that most provincial departments and municipalities lack economic mainstreaming plans, policies, programmes, and specialised youth directorates. Municipalities that have implemented youth economic development initiatives often operate with minimal budgets, resulting in only marginal impact. Furthermore, municipalities and provinces lack the data necessary to track, evaluate, and report on successes in the economic development of youth. Consequently, there is a knowledge void due to limited research regarding the country’s progress in addressing youth empowerment. Anon (2013) points out that, despite education being regarded as a crucial factor in the labour market, young individuals continue to face unemployment due to the prerequisite of prior work experience.

Candidates possessing higher levels of education and prior work experience are typically favored by employers, which creates a challenging situation for young people who lack such experience (Caporale & Gil-Alana, 2018). Another contributing factor to the economic obstacles that hinder youth empowerment is a lack of access to technology. In the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, as more companies adopt digital strategies, many young people, particularly those residing in rural and impoverished areas, encounter difficulties due to limited access to technology and connectivity. Oke and Fernandes (2020) note that there is a significant digital divide between affluent and impoverished populations in South Africa, which continues to impact young people’s opportunities for improving their livelihoods and securing employment. Furthermore, while an increased number of successful entrepreneurs could aid in addressing the unemployment issue, young entrepreneurs in South Africa continue to face a multitude of challenges that impede their ability to start, grow, and sustain businesses (Marwala, 2020).

3. RESEARCH PROBLEM AND RATIONALE

South Africa is now in its 31st year of democracy and continues to face significant challenges, namely slow economic growth, the imperative to reduce the unemployment rate, and managing the existing budget deficit. South Africa’s fiscal policy has undergone substantial evolution and transformation since 1970. This evolution can be

attributed to several factors, including population growth that has outpaced economic growth, a decrease in household income, and a considerable decline in economic growth resulting from the global financial crisis of 2008/2009 (Norton Rose Fulbright, 2020). Slow economic growth is the primary and most significant barrier to youth economic participation and inclusion. According to estimates, the South African economy needs to grow by approximately 5% per year to have any meaningful impact on youth unemployment (Cebekhulu, 2013).

Despite numerous macroeconomic initiatives designed to stimulate growth, including the Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP), Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (AsgiSA), the New Growth Path (NGP), and the NDP, the economy has not achieved the requisite growth levels to adequately address poverty and unemployment. The current circumstances, marked by a global economic decline predominantly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, suggest that the necessary growth may not materialize in the near future (Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), 2021). The unemployment rate in South Africa has risen since 2010, following the financial crisis of 2008/2009, and will only decrease when the economy is growing.

Young people in South Africa constitute a significant segment of the population and possess a diverse range of abilities, skills, and aspirations. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that the nation is confronted with several challenges that have the potential to inhibit the realization of this potential. According to information released by Stats SA in February 2024 regarding the fourth quarter of 2023, the overall number of young people who were unemployed increased by 87,000, reaching 4.7 million. Conversely, the number of young people who were employed declined by 97,000, totaling 5.9 million (Stats Biz, 2023). The unemployment rate among young people increased by 0.9 percentage points, rising from 43.4% in the third quarter of 2023 to 44.3% in the fourth quarter of 2023.

The target for the year 2015 was to reduce the unemployment rate to 20%, with a gap of 5.4% between the desired and actual unemployment rates. Between 2016 and 2020, there was a substantial increase in the unemployment rate, which resulted in the target for 2020 effectively doubling. Additionally, the NDP aimed to lower the unemployment rate from 22% to 14% by the end of 2020. However, by the end of 2020, the unemployment rate had risen to 32.5%, marking the first instance in South African history that it surpassed the 30% threshold. Table 1 provides an outline of the NDP 2030 targets, versus actual performance, in terms of employment and economic growth. The unemployment rate did not decrease between 2010 and 2020; instead, it experienced a significant increase of 9.5% during that period. The target for the years 2021 to 2025 is to reduce the unemployment rate to 8.6% by the end of 2025. There was a 0.1% increase in the unemployment rate in South Africa during the first quarter of 2021, raising the figure from 32.5% to 32.6%. In the second quarter, the unemployment rate rose by 1.8%, increasing from 32.6% to 34.9%. The NDP's target for the year 2025 is eight times higher than the current unemployment rate. Consequently, it is evident that the objectives set for the period from 2010 to the present have not been realised.

Table 1. NDP targets for unemployment, employment, and economic development from 2010 to 2030 versus actual performance.

| Indicators | Baseline (2010) | 2015 | | 2020 | | 2021 | | 2025 | | 2030 | |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------|------------|----------------|------------|----------------|------------|----------------|------------|----------------|------------|----------------|
| | | NDP target | Actual (Perf.) | NDP target | Actual (Perf.) | NDP target | Actual (Perf.) | NDP target | Actual (Perf.) | NDP target | Actual (Perf.) |
| Economic growth | 3.3% | 4.6% | 1.3% | 4.6% | -6.9% | 4.8% | 1.1% | 4.8% | | 5.0% | |
| Unemployment rate | 24.9% | 20% | 25.4% | 14% | 32.5% | 8.6% | 34.4% | 8.6% | | 6.0% | |
| Employment rate | 41.9% | 43.8% | 43.7% | 46.9% | 42.5% | 55.5% | 37.6% | 55.5% | | 61.0% | |
| Gap between target and actual unemployment rate | | | +5.4% | | +18.5% | | +25.8% | | | | |

Source: Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) (2021).

Since the NDP came into effect, fewer than half of the defined targets have been achieved. Conversely, the gap between the target and the unemployment rate has widened. One of the most concerning factors that significantly exacerbate South Africa's ongoing economic disparity is the country's high unemployment rate. Furthermore, [Banda, Ngirande, and Hogwe \(2016\)](#) assert that youth unemployment has been linked to significant increases in criminal activity, disease, civil unrest, and poverty in various contexts. The government is unable to generate employment opportunities for young people without annual positive economic growth, as there is insufficient revenue to fund youth programmes and development projects. According to the [National Planning Commission \(2012\)](#), the current sluggish economic growth will make it impossible for the government to generate the 11 million employment opportunities projected for the end of 2030.

[Richter \(2005\)](#) notes that long-term unemployment can impede the successful transition from adolescence to adulthood and affect multiple aspects of human development. For instance, it has been associated with reduced life expectancy, as well as stress, anxiety, depression, and general health issues. Moreover, persistently low incomes are linked to poorer mental health and well-being, particularly when they induce a sense of scarcity or insufficiency in comparison to community counterparts. Individuals with lower incomes are 1.5 to three times more likely to experience mental distress than those with higher incomes, and they are also more susceptible to traumatic events and violent crime.

[White and Wyn \(2004\)](#) highlight that when addressing the issue of youth employment from a human development perspective, the SANHDR underscores the importance of youth employment in both economic terms and for the advancement of human development. Employment not only provides economic support but also fosters human dignity, enabling individuals to develop their autonomy and capabilities while equipping them with the resources necessary to shape their lives and make constructive contributions to their communities. [Richter \(2005\)](#) specifies that the human development approach recognises that tackling youth unemployment issues extends beyond merely reducing the unemployment rate and increasing job opportunities. It is essential to prioritise the alignment of job prospects with individuals' career aspirations while concurrently addressing any barriers that impede a smooth transition from education to employment. These elements are vital for harnessing the demographic dividend and maximising the contributions of young people to shaping South Africa's future growth.

According to [Ranchhod and Daniels \(2021\)](#), the availability of high-quality employment opportunities plays a crucial role in promoting inclusive economic development and facilitating the long-term accumulation of human capital. Such employment opportunities are instrumental in enhancing both physical and psychological well-being and are of paramount importance for the younger generation to lead productive and meaningful lives. Conversely, young individuals who endure prolonged periods of job searching are likely to acquire fewer skills compared to their peers who engage in early-age on-the-job learning. Furthermore, [Cebekhulu \(2013\)](#) asserts that the phenomenon of long-term unemployment or underemployment has the potential to exacerbate the deterioration of skills and weaken individuals' connections to the labour market. This can result in a degradation of skills, reduced income, and, in some cases, complete withdrawal from the workforce.

The aspiration to enhance the economy through wealth creation remains a principal objective of South Africa's democratic government. It has been observed that young people require a diverse range of support structures, experiences, and opportunities to realize their full potential in contributing to economic growth. In this context, it is crucial to evaluate whether initiatives developed through PPPs benefit all intended beneficiaries. This study posits that the concepts of improved living standards and economic empowerment are inextricably linked, thus underscoring the significance of this research in offering valuable insight into the effectiveness of the YES PPP initiative in addressing youth unemployment while effectively leveraging the strengths of both the public and private sectors ([Yescombe, 2007](#)).

PPPs represent a strategic collaboration between public and private sector organizations that is characterized by clearly defined and mutually agreed-upon objectives aimed at delivering exceptional services to the public while

ensuring cost-effectiveness. These partnerships entail a contractual agreement where the private sector assumes certain responsibilities traditionally held by the public sector, such as the provision of services or infrastructure (Rogerson, 2010).

Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff (2011) assert that, to conduct a comprehensive analysis of PPPs, it is imperative to first understand their fundamental characteristics. Effective collaborations necessitate a strategic vision, clearly defined objectives, competent governance, and a focus on outcomes. The alignment of goals serves as the cohesive force that unites the parties involved and acts as the guiding principle that directs their actions (Bloomfield, 2006). Successful partnerships also prioritize outcomes and monitor progress by employing indicators and performance metrics to assess advancements and allocate financial resources efficiently. Furthermore, competent governance is essential for mitigating redundancy in organisational efforts and delineating the partners' distinct responsibilities (Broadbent & Laughlin, 2003).

PPPs manifest in various forms, depending on factors such as risk transfer, investment levels, and project types. The main types of PPP contracts include service agreements, where the government engages a private company to provide specific services for a limited duration (typically one to three years) while retaining overall responsibility and outsourcing operational aspects (Ham & Koppenjan, 2001). Another variant is the management agreement, through which the private sector administers public services while the government maintains ownership and responsibility. A further type is the lease agreement, wherein the private entity operates and maintains a public asset without assuming ownership. In this case, the public sector retains ownership while transferring operational risks to the private partner (Krishnan, 2014). Lastly, Lonsdale (2007) delineates concession contracts as a category wherein a private company (the concessionaire) operates, maintains, and finances infrastructure projects while public ownership persists. The company is entitled to collect user fees and may receive governmental financial support.

With regard to the various types of PPP contracts discussed above, the YES initiative exemplifies a collaborative PPP that unites the government, the private sector, and civil society to generate employment opportunities for young people. The DTIC embodies the government's role and offers Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) incentives to stimulate participation. Concurrently, the private sector finances and implements the programme by employing disadvantaged youths or sponsoring work placements. In contrast to traditional infrastructure-focused PPPs, YES represents a developmental PPP aimed at combating youth unemployment and fostering social impact.

Youth economic empowerment, as the focal point of this study, is defined by the African Union (2006) as the process of enabling young people to achieve financial success and to make informed economic decisions. This process encompasses the provision of skills, resources, and opportunities, such as vocational training, financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and mentorship, to assist the youth in establishing sustainable livelihoods (Filmer & Fox, 2014). Empowerment further entails the creation of conditions that permit young individuals to act independently, take ownership of their lives, and initiate personal and social transformation. It enhances their capacity to influence and manage their socio-economic responsibilities (Akintayo & Adiat, 2013; Anon, 2013).

Tashmia (2020) indicates that the establishment of YES can be attributed to its designation as a non-profit organization (NPO) initiated by business leaders through the CEO Initiative. This initiative represents a significant and innovative partnership between governmental and corporate entities aimed at promoting youth employment on a large scale; the collaborative function operates voluntarily and without specific contractual obligations. The government plays a crucial role in formulating national policies that encourage youth employment and in creating an enabling environment for businesses to engage, while private companies take the lead in implementing the program by providing young people with training and work experience. The official inauguration occurred in March 2018 under the auspices of President Cyril Ramaphosa. In 2018, discussions regarding legislative amendments to the Codes of Good Practice were undertaken prior to the commencement of operations for the YES NPO. In December 2018, YES successfully established its first companies and initiated its primary objective of promoting and enhancing the

employability of unemployed Black youths. This endeavor was facilitated by the implementation of new policy amendments to the B-BBEE codes, which adopted a demand-side approach.

As delineated by the [B-BBEE Commission \(2009\)](#), the YES team collaborated with the government, specifically the DTIC, to amend the Codes of Good Practice. The *Government Gazette* concerning YES was published in August 2018, followed by the issuance of a Practice Note in late October 2018, which conferred legal standing to the YES registration. The team devoted approximately 24 months to finalising this legislation, which provides incentives to companies that participate in youth employment initiatives by awarding them one or two levels higher on the B-BBEE scorecard, as well as the Employment Tax Incentive (ETI).

[Triologue \(2018\)](#) clarifies that the YES programme offers paid 12-month employment opportunities through corporate sponsorships, thereby generating new job prospects in areas with high unemployment rates. Job creation is achieved by employing a demand-side value chain approach. According to [Ryding \(2018\)](#), the legislative amendment, along with the transfer of the registration platform function to YES, enables YES to maintain a steadfast commitment to generating 12-month employment opportunities for young South Africans.

The following outlines YES's objectives. Firstly, the YES initiative represents a significant advancement in empowering South Africa's youth to gain work experience through employment placements. Secondly, the initiative seeks to address the unemployment of Black youths by providing employment and training opportunities through both non-accredited and accredited learning and development programs. Lastly, YES advocates for a culture of continuous innovation and acknowledges the transformative potential of disruptive approaches in challenging and altering the existing state of affairs ([Ryding, 2018](#)).

YES has established itself as a reputable collaborator within the employment sector in South Africa by facilitating the direct employment of young individuals by corporations or engagement with implementation partners, which also enables these corporations to enhance their B-BBEE ratings. To ensure the sustainability of this transformation and the associated modifications, YES has broadened its focus beyond the B-BBEE framework to amplify opportunities for its clients and for the YES participants ([Tashmia, 2020](#)). The value proposition extends beyond B-BBEE by incorporating a corporate partner's environmental, social, and governance policies and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into the process of generating employment opportunities for young individuals. The endeavor to achieve these aspects, which are deeply embedded in the global pursuit of enhanced sustainability, presents investment and expansion prospects, as well as potential collaborations for clientele ([Ryding, 2018](#)).

By aligning with the SDGs, YES assumes clear responsibility in promoting SDG 8, which focuses on the advancement of decent work and economic growth. Furthermore, YES, in collaboration with its host partners and various stakeholders, plays a significant role in contributing to the achievement of several other SDGs, particularly those addressing social and environmental concerns. [Tashmia \(2020\)](#) notes that YES operates as a collaborative movement that fosters connections among various sectors, industries, civil society, and the youth.

It is noteworthy that YES also aligns with SDG 17, which emphasizes the importance of partnerships in achieving sustainable development objectives. SDG 17 specifically advocates for the reinforcement of implementation mechanisms and the revitalization of global partnerships to promote sustainable development. As a proponent of sustainable development, YES acknowledges the necessity of critically assessing its involvement in key drivers such as education, innovation, gender equality, and responsible consumption and production. It recognizes that it bears a more distinct responsibility in challenging and transforming prevailing norms and practices.

Economic empowerment benefits young individuals by enabling them to make informed financial decisions that will lead to increased stability and confidence in both their personal and professional lives. This empowerment further opens avenues for improved employment prospects, fostering an entrepreneurial mindset, and establishing new enterprises. Another advantage of economic empowerment is its contribution to social mobility, as equitable access to financial assistance, education, and training can assist young people in breaking the cycle of poverty. Moreover,

financial stability can enhance psychological well-being by alleviating financial stress and permitting individuals to prioritize other facets of their lives (Lakin & Mahoney, 2006).

Isioma and Boadu (2018) elucidate that South Africa has implemented numerous programmes and measures to address the issue of youth economic empowerment. Nevertheless, despite the good intentions and focus on understanding and addressing youth employability challenges, these initiatives are beset by significant obstacles and barriers, including low economic growth, a mismatch between education and the job market, deficits in post-school education and skills, geographical and cost barriers, lack of work experience, limited social capital, and inadequate entrepreneurial support. These factors contribute to underemployment, job scarcity, and a lack of job opportunities for young people.

Youth economic empowerment is underpinned by several theories that provide a structured framework for understanding sustainable development. Babbie (2007) explains that theories guide the observation and analysis of key factors in empowering youth. The human capital theory emphasizes the role of education in economic growth, while the empowerment theory focuses on enabling young people to control their own futures (Altman, 2007). The Marxist theory stresses the state's responsibility for ensuring fairness and economic stability. In the context of PPPs, the stewardship theory advocates trust-based governance and long-term accountability, while the New Public Service theory emphasizes transparency and prioritizes community impact over financial goals (Hughes, 2018). These theories highlight the importance of aligning education, employment policies, and governance to create sustainable opportunities for youth while ensuring private sector accountability and social equity.

According to Howlett and Ramesh (2003), in order to foster economic growth, job creation, and foreign direct investment, the South African government developed a comprehensive PPP policy and legislative framework. This includes Treasury Regulation 16 (2004), which governs national and provincial PPPs, as well as the Public Finance Management Act (1999), which ensures financial oversight. At the municipal level, the Municipal Systems Act (2000) and the Municipal Finance Management Act (2003) regulate financial feasibility and risk sharing to ensure that PPP projects are viable and equitable across all levels of government.

Simultaneously, youth economic empowerment policies have been introduced to address unemployment and skill development, in alignment with the broader goals of PPP initiatives. These policies include the National Youth Development Policy Framework (2002-2007), which focused on small businesses and cooperatives for employment creation but lacked specific targets; the National Treasury (2010), which encouraged labour-intensive sectors and socio-economic initiatives to combat unemployment; the National Youth Policy (2009-2014), which framed youth unemployment as a societal issue and promoted second-chance education and skills development; and the National Youth Policy (2015-2020), which expanded its focus to include education, economic participation, health, and social inclusion, as supported by the Integrated Youth Development Strategy. Finally, the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) (2014) was designed to reduce hiring costs for businesses that employ youths to facilitate work experience and skills acquisition (African Union, 2006).

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was based on a qualitative research design that focused on the exploration of individuals' interpretations and understandings of their experiences with the aim of gaining insight into social realities. The research was both explorative and descriptive, as it assessed the status of the YES programme in fostering economic empowerment among South African youths. The descriptive aspect of the study assisted in identifying trends and patterns, as well as establishing a solid foundation for further comprehensive research (Matthews & Ross, 2010). The research method employed was a single case study. Yin (1994) asserts that a singular case study is specifically intended to enhance comprehension of a specific instance, such as an individual, group, event, or organisation. This study aimed to increase understanding of PPPs, particularly the YES programme, and its role in promoting youth economic empowerment in South Africa.

According to Kumar (2011), triangulation serves to confirm research findings, reduce deficiencies stemming from a single method or source, provide additional insights, identify and eliminate inconsistent data, and enhance the validity and credibility of a study. Ultimately, research triangulation instills greater confidence in researchers regarding their findings. This study utilized methodological triangulation, which involves collecting data from various sources to improve the reliability and credibility of social research. This method incorporated document analysis and interviews with current and successful participants of the YES programme, which allowed a comprehensive understanding of the research issue and enabled the comparison and confirmation of the results from different sources.

Population and sampling are essential elements in research that influence the accuracy and applicability of study results (Battaglia, 2008). Yes, a nationwide initiative has evolved into the largest youth employment programme in South Africa, providing high-quality jobs to 3,000 to 4,000 young people each month. Assessing the entire population was not feasible due to budget restrictions, time limitations, and other logistical considerations. Consequently, the researchers opted for a subset of the population, referred to as a “sample.” The sample size consisted of 12 YES youths, of whom six were current participants in the programme and six were alumni. The chosen sample size enabled the researchers to ensure the collection of comprehensive and relevant data, with primary emphasis on gaining an in-depth understanding of the participants’ experiences.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, where the interview schedule was developed in accordance with the study's research objectives. The interview questions were formulated from a preliminary literature analysis with open-ended questions, and secondary data were employed for the literature review (Kumar, 2011). The interviews provided an opportunity for the researchers to gather individuals’ experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge regarding the YES programme. The use of secondary data allowed the researchers to identify primary data sources and to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Adams, 2008).

5. FINDINGS

Qualitative thematic analysis was employed to explore the participants’ experiences and perspectives on the YES programme as a PPP. Thematic analysis assisted in identifying significant patterns in the collected data and enabled the researchers to examine themes related to the programme’s impact on youth economic empowerment. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method, the researchers first familiarised themselves with the data by repeatedly listening to the interview recordings and transcribing them. Table 2 illustrates the thematic analysis framework used in this study. The data were then reviewed and coded to identify key phrases and words related to PPP and youth empowerment. In the third phase, the researchers grouped the codes into themes and subthemes to reveal meaningful patterns, and categorized them into five primary categories. In the fourth phase, the researchers conducted recursive analysis by refining the themes to ensure that they accurately captured the key elements of the data and aligned with the research question. Finally, each theme was given a descriptive title to facilitate the communication of the study’s findings.

Table 2. Thematic analysis framework.

| Objectives | Refined themes | Coding and categorising data |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| To explain what YES entails | Participants’ knowledge of YES as a PPP initiative | What is your understanding of a PPP? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration between the public and private sectors • Similar objectives • Enhanced service provision • Financial implications |
| | | How would you align a PPP with the YES programme? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint effort • Led by the private sector • Financial implications |

| Objectives | Refined themes | Coding and categorising data |
|--------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| To highlight the importance of PPPs in YES | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gaining B-BBEE points |
| | Challenges in youth employment | <p>Explain what challenges you have encountered in finding employment prior to being a YES youth?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of experience Corruption Competitive job market Economic conditions Geographical barriers |
| | Expectations and effectiveness of YES | <p>What were your expectations when you first began participating in the YES programme?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acquire relevant work experience Skill attainment Exposure through given opportunities Learning process Lack of research <p>How would you rate the effectiveness of YES in meeting your expectations?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effective with an average score of 4.5 |
| | Opportunities provided by YES | <p>Which opportunities have you been exposed to via YES, and how has the experience changed your professional and social life?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Skills development Financial impact Growth through exposure Continued learning |
| | Enhancing your employability through YES | <p>What impact has YES had on your financial circumstances?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial freedom Social impact Independence |
| | | <p>In your opinion, do you believe that YES enhances the employability of young people? If so, how?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employment outcomes Broad impact Future prospects |

5.1. Analysis of Findings

The principal researcher conducted the interviews using a structured interview schedule that was designed to gather insightful data aligned with the study's objectives. The participants shared their experiences, views, opinions, feelings, and knowledge. Thematic analysis of the responses revealed six main themes.

5.1.1. Theme 1: Participants' Knowledge of the YES Programme as a PPP Initiative

The participants demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the YES programme and its main objectives. The key concepts that emerged from the responses were joint effort, private-sector-led, reducing youth unemployment, financial implications for the private sector, and the acquisition of B-BBEE points. These findings align with the literature, as Tashmia (2020) specifies that the founding of the YES programme can be attributed to its status as an NPO initiated by business leaders through the CEO Initiative. The initiative represents a substantial and pioneering partnership between governmental and corporate entities aimed at promoting youth employment on a significant scale.

5.1.2. Theme 2: Challenges in Youth Employment

Key aspects from the responses included inadequate access to educational and training facilities, which restricts future employability, as well as a lack of access to technology, which further isolates rural youths and diminishes their chances of participating in the evolving job market. Furthermore, social and cultural expectations, particularly those pertaining to gender roles, inhibit the ability of women residing in rural areas to pursue education and employment, thereby contributing to the high rate of unemployment among young women. These combined circumstances create a complex dilemma that necessitates the attention of various stakeholders in order to intervene and enhance the employability of young people in rural areas of South Africa.

5.1.3. Theme 3: Expectations and Effectiveness of the YES Programme

Overall, the programme was perceived as effective by the majority of the participants, with an average rating of 4.5, which reflects satisfaction with the learning opportunities and professional development it offers. Three participants indicated that the programme merely met their expectations and suggested areas for improvement, particularly concerning salary equity based on qualifications and adjustments to the duration of participation in the programme. According to the findings from the literature, these responses align with the objective of the YES programme, which primarily focuses on ensuring that young people gain relevant work experience.

5.1.4. Theme 4: Opportunities Provided by the YES Programme

The YES programme appears to offer a range of valuable opportunities that contribute to both professional and personal development. The participants reported significant gains in the following areas:

- Communication skills: Enhanced ability to communicate effectively, which benefits both professional roles and personal interactions.
- Leadership and management: Experience in leadership roles and the ability to manage responsibilities effectively under pressure.
- Skills development: Access to educational resources and practical skills, such as using Microsoft Excel and report writing.
- Professional growth: Opportunities for continued learning and exposure to different aspects of their respective fields.
- Social impact: Improvements in participants' time management and ability to navigate social challenges, which resulted in a more positive overall life experience.

5.1.5. Theme 5: Enhancing Youth Employability Through PPPs

Qualitative feedback from the participants in the YES programme provides valuable insights into the programme's impact on their financial circumstances. The responses illustrate a range of positive outcomes, reflecting significant improvements in financial stability, independence, and the ability to support others. The participants reported a notable reduction in their financial dependence on family members. This transition from reliance on family support to achieving self-sufficiency represents a significant achievement of the programme.

5.1.6. Theme 6: Measures for Economic Empowerment of South African Youths

The participants proposed improvements in education, better alignment of training with market needs, stricter enforcement of labour protection, financial support for young entrepreneurs, and expanded PPPs. [Figure 1](#) provides an overview of the main benefits of the YES programme as derived from the participants' responses.

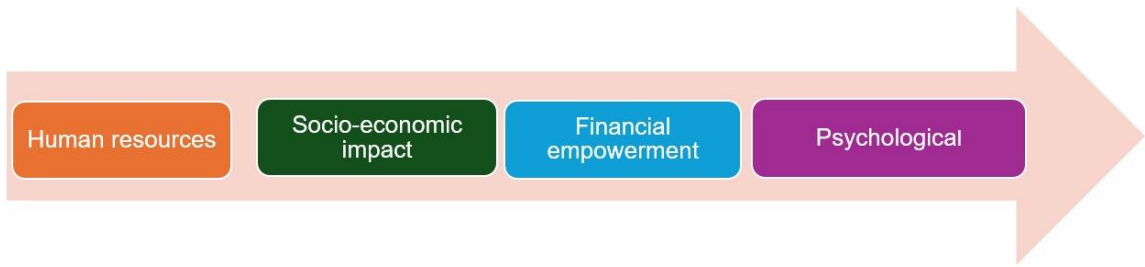


Figure 1. Benefits of the YES programme.

In addition, a number of specific success factors were identified for each of the categories outlined in Figure 1. These factors are specific benefits that have contributed to the success of the programme (see Figure 2).

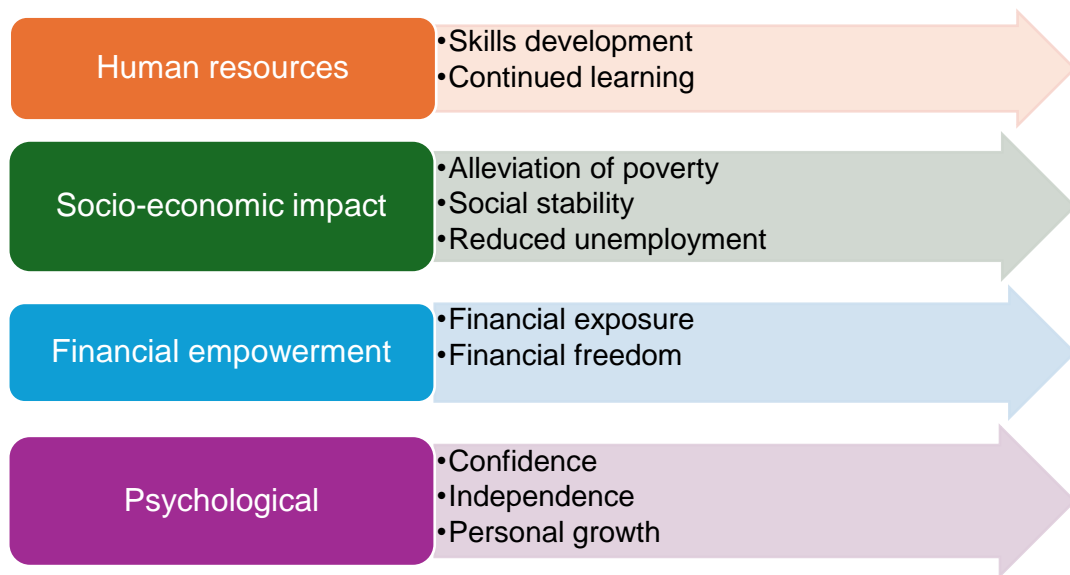


Figure 2. Specific success factors of the YES programme.

Human resource development: PPPs through the YES programme enhance youth employability by providing critical skills training and work experience that transform young individuals into valuable assets for the economy. This process contributes to the development of a skilled workforce that is better equipped to meet the demands of both public and private sector employers, which will strengthen the nation’s human capital. In this context, PPPs serve as a vehicle for capacity building, which is essential for sustainable economic empowerment among youths.

Socio-economic impact: PPPs in the YES programme address systemic unemployment by creating job opportunities that foster community upliftment and reduce socio-economic disparities. The collaboration between public policy frameworks and private sector investment leads to economic growth at both local and national levels, which generates a multiplier effect that not only benefits the youth but also positively impacts their families and the broader society. This illustrates how PPPs can drive socio-economic progress by actively engaging young people in the economy.

Financial empowerment: The YES programme provides young participants with direct access to income-generating activities, which allows them to achieve financial independence. By giving young people job opportunities, they not only earn wages but also establish long-term financial stability. PPPs act as a bridge that connects the youth with economic opportunities, which highlights how these partnerships promote financial empowerment as a key aspect of youth economic inclusion.

Psychological empowerment: Finally, the YES programme fosters psychological empowerment by enhancing young people’s confidence, sense of self-worth, and motivation. By providing opportunities to contribute meaningfully to the economy through employment or entrepreneurship, the programme cultivates resilience and hope

for the future. This psychological shift is crucial for sustaining youth empowerment, as it encourages a mindset oriented towards growth, innovation, and active economic participation.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The socio-economic landscape of South Africa is profoundly affected by youth unemployment, which represents a deep-seated challenge that contributes to poverty, inequality, and social instability. Despite the implementation of numerous macroeconomic initiatives aimed at stimulating growth, the economy has yet to reach the levels of expansion necessary to adequately address poverty and unemployment. Unemployment, regarded as a pandemic, necessitates a multifaceted strategy that addresses the structural and systemic obstacles faced by young individuals in the labour market. Employment not only provides economic support but also promotes human dignity by enabling individuals to develop their autonomy and capabilities, as well as providing them with the resources to construct their own lives and make positive contributions to their communities.

Unemployment continues to be a significant socio-economic challenge in South Africa that disproportionately affects the youth and exacerbates economic inequality, poverty, and social unrest. In response, various stakeholders, including the government, private sector, and civil society, have sought innovative solutions for youth economic empowerment. This study assessed the role of PPPs in addressing youth unemployment, focusing on the YES programme as a collaborative initiative. The research found that PPPs provide a structured approach to equipping young people with skills and job opportunities through coordinated efforts and resource integration. Despite challenges such as bureaucratic delays, regulatory complexities, and funding constraints, PPPs enhance economic inclusion by merging public resources with private sector innovation. The study highlighted the YES programme's potential to drive sustainable youth empowerment, foster economic stability, and contribute to long-term national development. By aligning with job market demands, promoting collaboration, and advocating inclusivity, the programme aims not only to create employment but also to transform lives.

The YES programme is a South African initiative designed to create employment opportunities for young people through partnerships between the public and private sectors. This research provides valuable insight into several critical aspects of socio-economic development. It contributes to the existing body of knowledge by investigating the impact of public-private collaboration through the YES programme on mitigating youth unemployment in South Africa, and by evaluating whether private sector-led training equips youths with relevant skills for the future job market while simultaneously addressing economic and social inequalities, particularly among historically marginalised youths. The study also offers perspectives on the most effective strategies for tackling South Africa's youth unemployment challenge and enhancing frameworks for public-private collaboration. This may also stimulate informed debate among policymakers, business leaders, and academics regarding how governmental incentives can effectively encourage private sector participation.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance South Africa's YES initiative for youth employment, several key recommendations are proposed. Firstly, post-programme support services should be established to assist young people in sustaining employment and advancing their careers in order to ensure long-term impact. Secondly, collaboration among the government, private sector, financial institutions, educational entities, and civil society is essential to promote entrepreneurship through the YES programme. Government policies should regulate corporate social responsibility initiatives to fund entrepreneurial development programmes, simplify business registration processes, and provide tax incentives for youth-owned enterprises. Thirdly, increased awareness of the YES programme is crucial for fostering greater youth commitment, particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas. Finally, future research should focus on identifying policy gaps and regulatory challenges to strengthen PPPs in fostering sustainable youth economic empowerment.

8. IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESULTS

The study highlighted the importance of public-private collaboration in South Africa in addressing youth unemployment and job creation. It suggested that stronger partnerships between the government and businesses could enhance job creation efforts. The study also emphasised the need for skill development programmes that align with future job market demands and underscored the need for policies that promote inclusive economic growth, particularly for historically marginalised youths. The findings can inform future policy reforms and business strategies and stimulate discussions on how government incentives can encourage private sector participation in employment creation.

9. LIMITATIONS

The study faced limitations due to limited resources and funding, which resulted in a sample size that did not adequately represent the diverse group of young people participating in South African programmes. To mitigate this, the researchers selected a sample that was representative of various demographic categories to increase the sample size and enable more in-depth analysis. Thematic data analysis, involving extensive manual scrutiny of qualitative data, also posed a limitation as it became overwhelming. Balancing theme richness and coherence proved challenging, leading the researchers to adopt an iterative strategy of revisiting and refining themes as new insights emerged. This approach aimed to develop and refine deeper insights while avoiding the acceptance of superficial ideas and focusing on gaining a comprehensive understanding of the unit of analysis.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The Ethical Committee of the University of Johannesburg, South Africa has granted approval for this study on 3 February 2022 (Ref. No. 21PMGPP44).

Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

Data Availability Statement: The corresponding author can provide the supporting data of this study upon a reasonable request.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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