

**Researching the Effectiveness of Skills Development Programmes:
Methodological difficulties and recommendations**

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Abstract:

This paper will discuss the role of Non-Profit Organisations in providing education and skills development to marginalised communities and the role they play in creating employment and better standards of living in a holistic manner. The effectiveness of such organisations will be examined, referring to the Accredited Permaculture Program (ATP) offered by the Non-Profit Organisation, SEED, in Rocklands Mitchells Plain. A study of eleven participants in the program will be used to assess SEED's effectiveness as a means of employment transformation and poverty reduction. Emphasis will be placed on the importance of targeting low-income households and communities in training programmes as a means to develop enterprises that help vulnerable households. Moreover, it will be shown that although such programs may be effective, there is often difficulty in gathering data and evaluating the success of such programs, not allowing for conclusive results. The paper will also consider the usefulness of employment and income as a proxy for standards of living, showing that projects like the SEED APT program have the potential to help people become more self-sufficient and less reliant on income and employment.



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Introduction:

Economic growth and development is largely hindered by poverty and unemployment (Masipa et al, 2014). In South Africa and Cape Town specifically, skills development shows promise for the empowerment of the economically vulnerable.

This paper will assess employment and income as key markers for the evaluation of the Further Education and Training sector. More specifically this paper will focus on training in urban agriculture as a proxy for skills development and evaluate how this may enable participants to better their standard of living through the means of cost reduction and improved employability.

Literature Review:

South Africa's economic performance is still hindered by historic events such as colonisation and apartheid (Rodney, 1972), which perpetuate the high levels of poverty and inequality that are experienced today. Poverty gradually depreciates the quality of life of all people. The literature presented by Rogerson (2003), defines poverty as a prominent aspect of life in post-apartheid South Africa, with at least 25 percent of households classified as poor. According to a report by the World Bank (2014), South Africa represents the highest level of income and wealth inequality in the world, with many households experiencing unsatisfactory access to education, healthcare and clean water. Furthermore, of great concern is the high level of unemployment, with an average rate of roughly 25 percent and a youth unemployment rate of almost double that (Alessi, 2013). When considering these statistics, it is important to examine potential measures that aim to reduce unemployment and increase the standards of living for people who live in marginalised communities. Although fiscal policies and labour market regulations may be used to achieve these goals, it is widely held that education, training and skills development are far more sustainable means of creating economic growth (Masipa et al, 2014).

The main theme that emerges from the literature is the importance of skills development in urban agriculture as a means of empowering individuals and developing communities (Masipa et al, 2014; Hart, 2012; Palmer, 2007; Rogerson, 2003). The critical role of training and skills development as highlighted by Masipa et al (2014) and Palmer (2007) is its potential to enable the economically vulnerable and socially excluded, thereby providing support in accessing greatly needed skills to improve incomes, productivity and employment opportunities. The key point in this regard is to promote socio-economic well-being for the previously disadvantaged. The literature clearly presents the view that job creation or, rather, decent work creation, is crucial in providing income for poorer people and that this presents the principal pathway out of poverty. Furthermore, Palmer (2007) explicitly states that although skills development can resolve issues of unemployment and poverty reduction, it will not be achieved unless a successful pro-poor economic strategy is developed.

In the context of poverty alleviation, it is found that with the current growth of urban poverty, specific strategies must be developed for South Africa's poor to enable them to be included in the economy and future economic development. Rogerson (2003) and Human et

al (2008), both investigate this “pro-poor” intervention, finding that when led by national government, the results fall short of the competitive market driven incentives. Human et al (2008) presents the view that the private sector is more able to readily identify and contribute towards establishing an entrepreneurial approach to business development. Funding is a recurring issue that poses difficulties for the survival of community project NPOs such as SEED. In order for these programmes to remain sustainable, there is a need and continuing battle for the organisations to attract funding. Often the collapse is attributed to poor project conceptualisation and implementation (Human et al, 2008; Palmer, 2007).

Another theme of the literature is the value of targeting. It is clear that targeting should be tailored to provide skills for the poor so that they may overcome historical barriers and be presented with greater opportunities (Poole et al, 2013). Again it is critical to understand people’s circumstances when evaluating and positioning an effective program, which, in this paper, are extrapolated from the 2011 Census of Mitchells Plain. Emphasised by the literature of Masipa et al (2014) and Rogerson (2003), is the importance of targeting women and single parents, in developing a better standard of living and legitimising a role for these marginalised people in their communities and local economy.

A critique of the literature is that emphasis is placed on the effects of training and skills development on increasing income and employment, but it neglects to mention the subtleties of how this process may improve the standard of living through other proxies. Such an example would show how a permaculture course could impart knowledge of cost reduction through small or home scale food production and renewable energies as measurable alternatives. An even more subtle effect of programmes like these is that they provide a more healthy subsistence and contribute to a more efficient lifestyle, further adding to a better standard of living without necessarily increasing income or aiding in employment.

When analysing the literature it is clear that the methods of training and implementation are different, yet the premise of skills development and community projects are common throughout (Masipa et al, 2014; Palmer, 2007; Poole et al, 2013; Rogerson, 2003). From agro-processing of indigenous foods to “pro-poor” urban development, urban agriculture and permaculture design, the recurring key point here is that, for real development to take place, further education and training should focus most importantly on the formation of decent livelihoods.

The literature comes to the consensus that these programmes are effective measures in creating improved income and employment opportunities. Yet over and above this, this paper will argue that such programmes also contribute to an improved standard of living through skills development and a move towards creating sustainable livelihoods, which are often not easily measured.

Methodology:

This study gathered information from recent participants of the SEED Accredited Permaculture Training program (APT) 2014. An initial meeting was conducted with the director of SEED in which the aim of the study was discussed and permission was granted.

From the onset the gathering of relevant information proved challenging, as SEED presented limited information and knowledge about their past participants. In correspondence with the organisation it was revealed that contact details of only fifteen past participants were available, narrowing the scope of the study and limiting inferences that could be made from any data. The research proceeded, however, as any, albeit limited, information would be useful when considering related literature.

To initiate the process of gathering the information needed, the organisation granted access to their database of resources pertaining to the program and its participants. An email was then received from SEED containing telephone numbers of the fifteen participants. Telephone calls were made to each participant respectively and it was requested that each provide a brief Curriculum Vitae or brief employment history. It was also requested that the participants answer a few short questions regarding their demographics and their attitudes towards the green economy. The correct research protocol as prescribed by The University of Cape Town was followed and participants were given the option to leave out any information that they felt uncomfortable disclosing. This method proved to be unsuccessful, as only three participants responded to the email. The approach was thus modified and further telephone calls were made to each participant, which a series of questions were asked regarding demographics, income, education, employment and attitudes toward permaculture and the green economy. A total of six telephone interview responses were recorded as well as three responses to the original questionnaire. These responses are presented in Table 1.

The goal in recording and analysing responses is to draw comparisons with the main theme of the literature, highlighting areas where the SEED APT program has been useful in creating better standards of living as well as highlighting the difficulties that such organisations face. Short studies of interesting cases will be conducted, discussing the importance of the respective participants' responses in the context of the research. A brief comparison to data obtained from the 2011 Census of the Mitchells Plain suburb will be used as a basis for understanding the relevant socio-economic factors in the community, so as to put into perspective the job and lifestyle transformation of the participants.

Results

Table 1: Summarised Responses To Emails and Telephone calls

Respondent	Age	Gender	Race	Stated Income Earned	Education	Employment
1	29	Male	African	None	-Matric -Further Education & Training in IT & Business administration	Unemployed
2	27	Male	African	±R4500pm	Matric	Employed
3	39	Male	African	None	-Matric -Further Education in Tourism and Human Resources	Unemployed
4	23	Female	African	Little to none	Financial troubles hindered the completion of matric	Part-time jobs
5	27	Female	African	Little to none	-Grade 10	Unemployed
6	22	Male	African	NA	-Grade 9 -Primary Agriculture: Level 3	Unemployed
7	40	Female	Coloured	±R2000pm	NA	Unemployed
8	21	Male	Coloured	±R13000pm	-Grade 10 -Other online education	Employed
9	51	Male	African	R2000- R5000pm	-Matric - Various courses in business and agriculture related fields	Employed

Table 2: Summary of relevant data extracted from the 2011 Census of the Mitchells Plain suburb

	Black African	Coloured	White	Other	Total
% of population	7.3%	90.8%	0.2%	1.1%	100%
Education	1.2%	1%	0%	5.9%	1.1%
None	34.5%	50%	39.7%	37.1%	48.7%
Grade 10	35.6%	27.9%	37.2%	34.2%	28.6%
Grade 12	18.3%	4.8%	14.9%	9.3%	5.9%
Higher					
Unemployment	21.56%	24.47%	11.54%	18.94%	24.13%
Income per month (R/pm)	11.6%	10.2%	10.6%	13.3%	10.4%
0	24.3%	28.2%	21.3%	22.8%	27.8%
1-3200	33.9%	41.2%	29.8%	38.6%	40.5%
3201-12800	19.2%	14.5%	23.4%	8.7%	14.9%
12801-25600					

Discussion:

Case Studies

Respondent 7

The respondent is a forty year old, coloured woman, who was born in Stellenbosch. She was introduced to SEED by a teacher at Rocklands Primary School in 2011 and went on to do courses in mushroom cultivation and seed saving (which involves learning about how to harvest and process seeds). Besides completing the APT program, she has also completed a five-month internship with SEED and is currently a volunteer for the FoodFreedom project, which involves setting up vegetable gardens in homes around the community. She feels that the skills that she has obtained throughout her training with SEED have changed her attitude towards life and have allowed her to positively impact the community. Although she feels positive about her experience with SEED, she has been unemployed for several years and relies on an income of more or less R2000pm. This indicates that although the program has provided her with the ability to contribute to her community and has made her more positive, she still lives in poverty and remains unemployed. To put this respondent's circumstances into perspective, it is valuable to consider that of the 48.7% of the Mitchells Plain population who have no education at all, 50% are Coloured people. The Coloured community in Mitchells Plain also makes up a large proportion of the low income earning population. Although the respondent does not live in Mitchells Plain, the data is indicative of the levels of education and income of people of the same race as the respondent in the Western Cape.

Respondent 6

The respondent is a twenty-two year old African male who has received a relatively large amount of training and experience in agriculture. His highest level of formal education is Grade 9, which he obtained in 2010. He went on to complete three levels of training in primary agriculture at a college in Gauteng and has completed a variety of short-courses such as: Poultry Business Skills and Permaculture Design. Respondent 6 has worked with Greenpeace Africa, Syaka Projects and a number of related organisations. His work with these organisations only lasted for, roughly, three months at a time. During his time with SEED, Xola felt that he learnt to apply the practical and theoretical elements of soil fertility management, water management and the like. It is noted that he found the job shadowing opportunities provided by the course on urban organic production and mushroom cultivation particularly useful. The respondent displays a complex understanding of and enthusiasm for agriculture, permaculture and all related fields. His variety of education and experience is an indication that the SEED program and agriculture in general are less a means out of poverty than what they are interests.

Respondent 9

Respondent 9 is a fifty-year-old African male. Besides his participation in SEED's APT program, he has completed courses in a variety of fields, namely: a Higher Certificate in Adult Education from the University of Cape Town, other courses in financial management, human resources, marketing and business administration, as well as entrepreneurship courses. Paul has an interesting and somewhat counter-intuitive employment history. He worked as a department manager at both Woolworths™ and Pick n' Pay™ from 1989 to 1996, after which he worked as a junior tax accountant at Ernst & Young™ from 1996 to 2006. He then worked as a picker, packer and checker for Master Parts™ for a year and went on to work as a junior journalist and teacher's assistant in subsequent years. The respondent currently works as a cashier at Exclusive Books™ in Cape Town. His diverse employment history does not indicate that he has been interested in agriculture related fields at all, but considering his response to the questionnaire it was seen that his views on food and nature had changed after completing the APT program. He holds that the program taught him to respect nature and understand ways of growing good quality produce. Paul's outlook towards employment and lifestyle has also changed, as he now aims to live simply and be able to provide for himself by growing his own vegetables.

The contrast between the respondents' cases indicates that some participants enter programs like the SEED APT program because they are in need of skills development and require an avenue of entry into employment and/or self-sufficiency. While some are less reliant on the program but choose to participate because they are genuinely interested in permaculture and related fields.

General Results

A further analysis of the responses and comments presented in *Table 1* will provide insight about the effectiveness of the SEED APT program.

The participants who completed the APT course in 2014 are generally between the ages of 20 and 30. Considering that the majority of these respondents are unemployed or only work part-time, consistency is found with the literature, of high youth unemployment in South Africa. The ability of the program to reduce unemployment must thus be questioned. One participant stated that he had not gone through the effort to explore the opportunities that

the program may have given him. While another respondent is employed by an organic painting company. From this one could infer that through this program a participant may find work in the green economy and earn a wage. It must be noted, however, that the incomes of the participants employed are relatively low, showing that although jobs may be available, the incomes that they recoup may not be sufficient to significantly increase their standard of living. A possible explanation for the low levels of income is the general lack of higher education, with a number of the respondents having not completed high school. It must be highlighted that the respondents were either of Black African or Coloured race. Considering the lack of employment and low incomes, the inequality between race groups in South Africa is highlighted to some extent by the findings. It is important to note, however, that not all participants of SEED's programs are likely to be of the same demographics as the participants that were studied. Due to this, any inferences made are broad and inconclusive, but this paper aims to maintain consistency with the data of the 2011 Census for Mitchells Plain. The Data in *Table 2* shows that 21.56% and 24.47% of the unemployed people in Mitchells Plain were Black Africans and Coloured respectively. When considering this, it is important to note that Black Africans and Coloured people make up 7.3% and 90%, almost all of the population in Mitchells Plain. It is evident too that these groups are lower income earners and continue to experience income inequalities. One can extrapolate that the SEED APT course has appropriately targeted the economically vulnerable, who in this case are the lower income earners in already marginalised black African and coloured communities.

An aspect of the response, consistent with the case study of respondent 7, is that respondents expressed a general inability to look for opportunities in the green economy because their poverty forces them to do any work that becomes available. One participant also indicated an inability to grow a vegetable garden because of theft in the community (Respondent 5). These socio-economic factors indicate that although the program might be effective in changing attitudes toward food and the environment, as in the case of respondent 6, some of the participants are unable to use the skills that the program has taught them.

A particularly interesting response from one of the participants was that he had completed the program with the hope of moving to the Eastern Cape later on in life to pursue subsistence farming. Another participant indicated that he has come to view food as a form of medicine and not just a means to stay alive, while others expressed that they had become able to enjoy cheaper and better quality food by maintaining their own vegetable gardens in the limited space they have available. It becomes apparent when considering responses of this nature that not only has the program given the participants a means to be self-sufficient, but has also made them more positive about their prospects. This puts into context the usefulness of the program in helping people to pursue different, more efficient lifestyles as opposed to merely being a means of finding employment and increasing income.

It was generally found that the respondents had become more disciplined and more aware of the cost saving benefits of being able to grow their own food and reduce consumption. Considering this, the fact that income and employment are used so often as proxies for a good standard of living must be questioned. Often policy that is aimed at reducing poverty emphasises the need for higher wages and job creation. In finding that programs such as the SEED APT program help to better standards of living of its participants in a different way, there is merit in considering the ability of programs of this nature to play a larger role in poverty alleviation, given that they get more exposure and emphasis. Further highlighting the aforementioned critique of the literature, it is seen that although the majority of respondents remain unemployed and income levels remain relatively low, they are given the tools necessary to make the most of their circumstances. If employment and higher incomes

are difficult to achieve, there is merit in considering programs like SEED's APT course in that people are enabled to minimise living costs, learning to consume less and become more self-sufficient.

Recommendations

The monitoring of programs that aim to reduce poverty and unemployment is imperative to their success. Tracking and maintaining contact with participants who have completed these programs helps organisations follow progress of participants, assess how their circumstances have changed and consider possible improvements to the programmes. As found by Hart (2012), the monitoring of programs such as SEEDs courses is particularly difficult.

This research set out to determine the areas in which the SEED program is particularly successful and where potential areas for improvement are evident. A recommendation is that better tracking of participants must be done. Tracking will result in larger groups of participants being available for research. If research, such as that conducted in this paper, can be more conclusive, the organisation will have more concrete ideas about the success of the program and be more aware of areas in which it can be improved. Furthermore, it is recommended that SEED hold regular meetings with past participants. These meetings will provide a platform for networking among participants and enable SEED to better monitor their progress. Finally, further research needs to be done by or on behalf of SEED in order to interpret the important, but little understood, ways in which urban agriculture might contribute to establishing stronger social relations and community networks.

Conclusion

This research aimed to examine the areas in which the SEED APT program has been effective and determine possible improvements that can be made. Due to the challenges faced in terms of data collection, results were generally inconclusive. From the responses by past participants it was found that the program does well to change the attitudes and lifestyles of participants. The general theme of the literature indicates that programs such as the SEED APT program should be geared towards reducing unemployment and increasing income. It was found, however, that although the program has not generally resulted in formal employment and higher income, it has done well to assist participants towards empowerment and self-sufficiency. This finding further questions the reliability of employment and income as a proxy for standards of living and poverty. Given the nature of the South African economy, it is important to consider the ability of programs like these to reduce poverty despite their inability to contribute directly to employment and income.

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