

# The effectiveness of the Expanded Public Works Programme on job creation: a look at a South African metropolitan municipality

BETTY CLAIRE MUBANGIZI AND NOZIPHO FLORENCE MKHIZE

## Abstract

One of the goals of South Africa's Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), agreed upon at the 2003 Growth and Development Summit, is to increase the participation of unskilled and unemployed people in the economy of the country. The EPWP has three objectives: providing employment to the unemployed, building the skills base of the unskilled, and building public infrastructure in the form of roads, schools and other amenities. In multifaceted development programmes such as the EPWP, it is easy to lose sight of these respective goals. When this happens, various role players – depending on how they have conceptualised the Programme – focus on the narrow objectives that are of direct interest to them.

This paper reports of a study that examined how the eThekweni Municipality's EPWP has been conceptualised, with particular regard to job creation. It attempts to establish the extent to which the beneficiaries of the EPWP have been able to obtain and sustain decent jobs beyond their involvement in the Municipality's EPWP. The study indicates how public officials and beneficiaries seem to have varying perceptions of what the EPWP aims to achieve, and it makes recommendations on how to reconcile these divergent views to yield sustainable benefits for both public officials and project beneficiaries.

The study was largely qualitative, seeking to establish people's views and perceptions on the Programme, and was packaged with one-on-one interviews with selected officials to gain a deeper understanding of the situation.

**Key words:** Public Works Programmes, job Creation, poverty relief, local governance

## Sumário

Um dos objetivos do Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), acordada na Cimeira sobre Crescimento económico e Desenvolvimento em 2003, é aumentar a participação de pessoas sem qualificação e desempregados na economia do país. O EPWP tem três objetivos: proporcionar emprego aos desempregados, a construção da base de competências de trabalhadores não qualificados e a construção de infraestruturas públicas, na forma de estradas, escolas e outras. Num contexto multifacetado de programas tais como o EPWP, é fácil perder de vista esses objetivos. Quando isso acontece, vários actores – dependendo de como eles têm conceptualizado o programa – focam-se mais nos objetivos estreitos que são de interesse directo.

Este artigo relata um estudo que analisou como EPWP do Município de Thekwini foi concebida, nomeadamente em matéria de criação de emprego. Ele tenta estabelecer a medida

em que os beneficiários do EPWP teriam sido capazes de obter e manter empregos decentes para além do seu envolvimento em EPWP do Município. O estudo indica como funcionários públicos e beneficiários parecem ter diferentes perceções do que o EPWP pretende alcançar, e faz recomendações sobre como conciliar esses pontos de vista divergentes para produzir benefícios sustentáveis para ambos os funcionários públicos e beneficiários do projeto.

O estudo foi em grande parte qualitativo, buscando estabelecer visões e perceções das pessoas sobre o Programa, e foi sustentado por entrevistas um-em-um com funcionários selecionados para ganhar uma compreensão mais profunda da situação.

**Palavras chave:** Programas de Obras Públicas, criação de empregos, alívio da pobreza, governação local

## Background

A key objective of the 2003 national Growth and Development Summit (GDS) of South Africa was to tackle the continuing disjuncture between growth in the South African economy and the high numbers of unskilled and unemployed people who still fail to derive benefit from it. South Africa's GDP has, according to the South African Revenue Bank (2010), steadily increased from R1.175 billion in 2006 to R1.294 billion in 2010. However, according to the diagnostic report of the national Planning Commission, currently only 41% of South Africa's working population is working (National Planning Commission, 2011:12) To address this issue, one of the initiatives agreed upon at the job summit held in 2003, was what came to be known as the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP).

The EPWP, first rolled out in 2004, creates temporary work opportunities for the unemployed using public sector expenditure to build public infrastructure with a strong social development focus. Recognising that most of the unemployed are also unskilled, the EPWP focuses on job creation for a relatively unskilled workforce. It is the intention that once established, these work opportunities will be combined with training, education or skills development that will enhance workers' ability to obtain a job when they leave the programme. The EPWP thus has three objectives: create jobs, alleviate poverty and train people for the job market. They are hopeful objectives, and how far they may be realised remains to be seen.

So far, evidence has yet to emerge of any significant effect of the EPWP on unemployment and poverty levels in South Africa. These levels remain disturbingly high, despite the range of initiatives and frameworks to develop skills and create jobs for the lower end of the workforce.

## The problem statement

The continuing predicament of the eThekweni Municipality is that while it strives to provide world class services, high levels of unemployment mean its citizens are often unable to pay for these services. Like all municipalities, eThekweni generates revenue from its citizens through municipal

rates along with charges on water and electricity. An unemployed (and often unemployable) citizenry both reduces the revenue flow and also inflates expenditure, because funds must be diverted to mandated support for the indigent (such as free basic provision of water and electricity). The size of the indigent population is hence in direct proportion to the income that a municipality will forfeit from its coffers. For this reason, it is directly in the interest of the municipality to reduce the levels of indigence and unemployment within its bounds. In this regard, the EPWP offers eThekweni Municipality a potentially well-suited framework, both for responding to its immediate unemployment situation, and reducing poverty in the longer term.

Policy analyst Jean Triegaardt (2007) argues that South African unemployment is a chronic, structural problem, rather than an acute, cyclical one. The EPWP attempts to address this structural problem by 'bridging the gap' between the unemployed and the jobs that they could fill if they were better skilled. By creating temporary, rather than sustained employment (which would admittedly do more to alleviate the unemployment problem), the EPWP can be criticised for having missed the mark. Yet the Programme doesn't claim to do more than offer a partial solution to the structural unemployment problem.

The Department of Public Works' (DPW) website acknowledges that "the EPWP will not solve the structural unemployment problem". Rather, it presents the EPWP as just "one of South African Government's short-to-medium term programmes aimed at the provision of additional work opportunities coupled with training" (DPW, 2011). That said, it is significant that the Programme is being counted on to relieve the unemployment situation by creating a consistent pool of 4.5 million temporary job opportunities. The short-term nature of the jobs provided by the EPWP can be attributed to the nature of the work (such as once-off construction projects), and to its objective of boosting workers' skills so that they can compete for longer-term jobs outside of the Programme. It is for the latter reason that training is a critical element of the Programme.

The difficulty however, is that some municipalities do not view the programme as one of job creation, but rather as an infrastructural development one. There thus appears to be a disjuncture between the EPWP objectives and those of the municipalities that implement the programme.

## Objectives of the study

This study investigates how the EPWP has been conceptualised in the eThekweni Municipality with particular regard to job creation. It also attempts to establish the extent to which the beneficiaries of the EPWP have been able to sustain decent jobs beyond their involvement in the Programme, and hence to gauge the Programme's effectiveness in relation to its stated aims.

## Conceptual underpinnings

According to the Quarterly Labour Force Survey for Quarter 3 of 2011 (Statistics South Africa, 2011), the estimated unemployment rate for South Africa was 25%. Of the 4,4 million people who remained unemployed, just over 3,0 million (68,2%) had been without work for at least one year. Furthermore, 60,2% of job seekers did not have matric, which further limits their

chances of finding employment. It is against this backdrop of high numbers of unemployed (and largely unemployable) but able-bodied South Africans that public works programmes (PWP) are conceived and implemented. As described by Biyase and Bromberger (2005), "The primary purpose of a PWP is poverty alleviation through labour absorption, and this is frequently achieved through the creation of public assets using labour intensive methods." These authors go on to note that the effectiveness of a public works programme depends on the benefits (direct and indirect) that it confers on the poor; on the costs of participation it requires (or imposes), and on the way it is financed.

While it would be imprudent to expect that public works programmes (the EPWP included) could on their own resolve the unemployment problem of post-apartheid South Africa, the EPWP presents itself as an appropriate short- to medium-term intervention to alleviate poverty associated with the unemployment of able-bodied but unskilled adults. Phillips (2004:7) describes it as a cross-cutting programme to be implemented by all spheres of government and state-owned enterprises. Through its nation-wide application, it is intended to draw significant numbers of the unemployed into productive work where they will gain skills and thereby increase their income-earning capacity. A crucial element of the EPWP should thus be to improve the employability of the beneficiaries beyond the project. It is according to this criterion that the programme will be judged as efficient.

Phillips (2004:2) differentiates between economically efficient and inefficient public works programmes (PWP). Inefficient PWPs create employment but do so wastefully without creating quality public infrastructure. In contrast, economically efficient programmes provide quality public infrastructure in a cost-effective way, and have a strong regard for the social objective of the programme – which, in the case of the EPWP, is to build workers' skills level and increase their chances of employment. In a resource-constrained environment such as South Africa's, PWPs are only sustainable if they are economically efficient. According to Phillips (2004:2), well-conceived PWPs deliver simultaneously on a range of valuable objectives: "providing public services; temporarily increasing incomes; increasing dignity, reducing alienation, and giving people valuable experience of the workplace; and making a modest contribution to raising skills levels".

Negotiations between organised labour, the construction industry and government on appropriate protection for workers in a PWP resulted in the establishment in 2002 of a Code of Good Practice that sets targets for the employment of youth, women and people with disabilities. The code requires that pertinent community-level structures be consulted in the selection of workers to be recruited on PWP projects, and it emphasises the importance of providing the unemployed with a combination of work experience and training.

Reviewing international PWP trends, McCord (2007) considers a variety of PWPs ranging from small- to very large-scale initiatives. These include the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Scheme in India and the New Deal programme in the 1930s in USA – both of which absorbed up to 30% of the unemployed populations of their respective countries when they were implemented (McCord, 2007:8). Noting that PWPs can vary greatly in scale and objectives, McCord (2007:49)

identifies four distinct PWP types:

- programmes offering short-term employment;
- programmes promoting labour intensification of government infrastructure spending;
- large-scale government employment programmes which offer some form of employment guarantee; and
- programmes which enhance employability.

While each stresses the provision of employment with some form of social protection, each PWP type implies a different conception of public works and has different institutional implications. South Africa's EPWP, which embraces a number of simultaneous objectives, shares characteristics with all four of these PWP types. This makes it a conceptual hybrid in terms of its aspirations. Its form, however, is demarcated by a specific emphasis on short-term, labour-intensifying and skills-formational requirements. The combination of these multivariate objectives in a programme positioned to focus on labour intensification is potentially problematic as it requires all role-players to have a common understanding of the objectives.

McCord (2007) notes that in the EPWP, increasing aggregate employment through labour intensification and small-scale government employment is directly tied to improving the future employability of participants – in other words, 'employment now, and enhanced employability for the future'. McCord argues that:

In the former case, PWPs are reviewed in terms of their immediate impact on participants and their macroeconomic impact on employment and unemployment, while in the latter case, programme performance is reviewed in terms of the employment and earnings experience of participants after leaving the programme (McCord, 2007:7).

Which approach is adopted is dependent on the perceived purpose of the PWP, whether that be 'to close an economy's job gap' or to 'enhance the 'employability' of jobless workers in an economy that is presumed to have jobs available for them to fill" (McCord, 2007:7).

Considerations such as these make the EPWP a conceptually complex intervention for poverty alleviation, in which potentially diverging requirements have to be continuously reconciled. Much depends on all EPWP participants being able to work together, and with an adequately shared understanding of the programme objectives from the outset. This way, beneficiaries and implementers alike are more likely to have appropriate expectations of what the Programme can in fact achieve.

With its multifaceted objectives, the EPWP requires multifaceted coordination. While PWPs in South Africa were up until this point directly undertaken by national or provincial government, EPWPs are planned and run by a variety of authorities at all levels of government, and also by sector departments. However, the Department of Public Works remains the overall coordinating department responsible for (i) monitoring and evaluation, (ii) making progress reports to Cabinet, (iii) promoting linkages between sectors (e.g. through learning networks), and (iv) putting in place common support

programmes (e.g. access to credit for learner entrepreneurs) and common monitoring, evaluation, exit strategy, and training frameworks. To this end, an EPWP Unit with approximately 15 professional positions, has been created in the Department of Public Works (Phillips, 2004:9).

Each of the sector coordinating departments is in turn required to:

champion the EPWP in their sector; produce a sectoral plan identifying areas of expansion for EPWP approaches and setting targets for expansion; facilitate the meeting of common needs in the sector (e.g. sectoral training and qualifications frameworks and sectoral guidelines); monitor implementation against the sectoral plan; and produce sectoral progress reports to the Department of Public Works (Phillips, 2004:9).

Devolving implementation from national government to provincial and municipal government makes the EPWP highly decentralised and this offers possibilities for leveraging funds that have a variety of objectives (Lieuw-Kie-Song, 2009). The difficulty with decentralisation, however, is that the proliferation of accountable departments greatly complicates enforcement of grant conditions, and the EPWP Unit at national level has little control over the Programme and is not in a position to enforce compliance.

## The eThekweni EPWP

The EPWP Policy Framework developed by eThekweni Municipality was initially adopted in April 2007 and has since been rolled out across all sectors and clusters within the Municipality. Defined in conformity with the Municipality's mainstream development plans, the objectives for the eThekweni EPWP are:

- to establish the eThekweni's EPWP as an approved socio-economic developmental and poverty alleviation programme with sustainable exit strategies that maximise SMME development, employment creation and skills development;
- to entrench the EPWP methodology within the IDP (Integrated Development Plan) – a methodology that expands the current service delivery model of goods and services to ensure shared economic growth; and
- to ensure developmental integration across all sectors and re-engineer how we plan, design and implement projects/programmes within the existing municipal operational and capital budgets (eThekweni Municipality, 2007).

Implementation strategies for the Programme are centred on the re-orientation of line function budgets (capital and maintenance) so that for every unit of expenditure the focus is on:

- maximising employment opportunities from each administrative cluster's business plan;
- developing sustainable skills and capacity within communities through EPWP training programmes using accredited training providers; and
- developing sustainable emerging enterprises through accredited learnerships.

Each administrative cluster is charged with developing and implementing its individual sector plans and ensuring EPWP compliance in terms of the respective national sector EPWP guidelines. eThekweni's EPWP policy provides for interventions in each of the four sectors named in the national policy: the infrastructure sector, the environment/tourism and culture sector, the social sector, and the economic sector. Each cluster plan should consist of identified projects, associated budgets, training requirements, resource requirements, monitoring and evaluation methodologies, and deliverables against timeframes.

The EPWP Progress Report for 2011 (eThekweni Municipality, 2011) indicates significant advances since the Programme's inception. An example of this is the EPWP's Contractor Development Programme (the two-year Vuk'uphile Contractor Learnership) through which a number of emerging contractors have been trained to manage construction teams, thereby boosting the city's construction capacity and increasing its pool of professional contractors and supervisors.

## Research methods

A short questionnaire was used to source data from a sample of project beneficiaries of the EPWP, and one-on-one interviews were held with municipal officials who had had direct involvement with the EPWP for at least three years. In all, data was collected from:

- six municipal officials, selected on the basis of their involvement in the implementation of the EPWP for a period of at least three years;
- two contractors, selected on the basis of having been part of the EPWP for at least three years; and
- twenty-five community members, selected randomly from a list of beneficiaries as sourced from the Municipality.

Ethical clearance was obtained in line with ethical guidelines stipulated by the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

## Key research questions

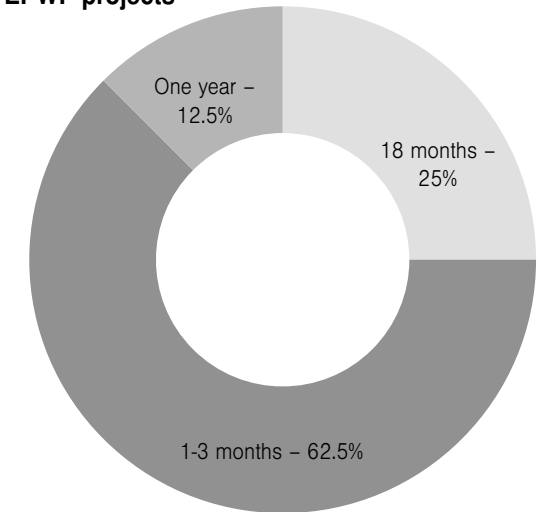
- Were the EPWP training targets met in the last financial year?
- Were the recipients of the EPWP able to sustain jobs beyond the project?

## Presentation of findings

A critical measure of EPWP goal achievement in poverty alleviation is the duration of created jobs – in other words, the length of time beneficiaries are employed under EPWP. Figure 1 shows how long the beneficiaries of the EPWP were typically employed for any one infrastructure development project.

Nearly two thirds (62.5%) of the jobs created were short-term contracts of 1 to 3 months. A quarter of the contracts were for 18 months, and 12.5% of created jobs ran for a year.

**Figure 1: Duration of employment in specific EPWP projects**



## Achievement of EPWP targets by eThekweni Municipality

Among the beneficiaries interviewed, some were happy just to have found employment of any kind, but many felt that the targets had been either partially achieved or not at all. Some respondents mentioned that they had received training in community development work, HIV/AIDS counselling and gardening while working on the EPWP. Subsequently, they had found other positions within the Municipality where they were continuing to work on pertinent social development issues in the community. These benefits notwithstanding, some beneficiaries nonetheless complained of administrative difficulties that prevented them from benefiting from the EPWP's training objectives.

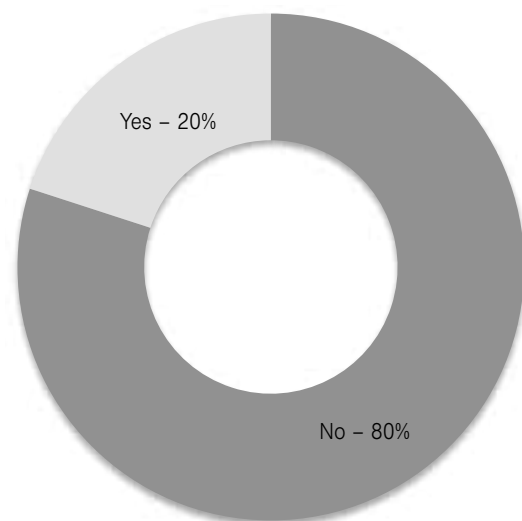
These impressions were confirmed in the focus group discussions with municipal officials working on the Programme, who cited the following reasons for non-achievement of EPWP training targets:

- budgetary constraints brought about by competing and equally important social demands on the Municipality;
- a lack of involvement in joint planning processes by pertinent sectors of the Municipality. Respondents pointed to the fact that the social sector of the Municipality was not included in the IDP. As a result, insufficient funds were allocated for this sector (which relied solely on the Municipal Department of Health's social development unit for financial support);
- a lack of dedicated EPWP staff in the Municipality. As the EPWP is not regarded as a permanent mainstream programme of the Municipality, it does not feature in the municipal organogram. As a result, the only personnel assigned to EPWP activities were four drivers who had been nominated by deputy municipal managers to perform EPWP functions over and above their appointed duties. The EPWP social sector currently depends on in-service trainees serving on short-term contracts;
- unclear intergovernmental coordination mechanisms that often lead to blurred communication between the different spheres of government. This lack of communication means that the Municipality does not sufficiently benefit from the repository of experience that no doubt exists at the national level.



## Employment sustainability

Figure 2: Employment sustainability



A large majority of respondents, both in participant interviews (see Figure 2) and in focus group discussions with officials, doubted that trainees and beneficiaries in EPWP programmes would be able to secure decent future employment that would serve them beyond the duration of their involvement in the EPWP.

Respondents pointed out that although the Municipality provided beneficiaries with simple skills and sometimes also necessary equipment to start their own business, very few people were actually in a position to start businesses or form co-operatives, as had been hoped in the planning phase of the Programme. Criticisms were that the skills training programme fell short in developing adequate skills for beneficiaries to find jobs,

and that even the work experience gained was problematic because the EPWP does not award any form of certification – so beneficiaries subsequently seeking jobs have nothing to show would-be employers. Even where skills were gained, beneficiaries would not have the start-up capital to launch their own businesses and create employment for themselves.

## Discussion

The EPWP is one way in which the eThekweni Municipality attempts to respond to the local unemployment situation. Although intended to tackle the structural roots of the unemployment problem, the EPWP focuses in practice only on short-term work opportunities because it is constrained by the nature of work in the particular industries where it is most commonly involved (such as once-off maintenance projects). Creating temporary rather than sustained employment (which would be more suitable in the context of South Africa's unemployment challenge) means that the EPWP is limited in its ability to address the deeper problem.

The study indicated various reasons why eThekweni EPWP targets were not met, including budgetary and administrative constraints. While it was clear enough that the EPWP was actively underway in the Municipality, with tenders regularly being awarded under the Programme, the most obvious drawback was that too many of these were tenders of very short duration, and for menial work such as providing pack-sheds and distributing food hampers. Projects of such short duration cannot seriously be regarded as responsive to the unemployment problem. Not only is there little by way of remuneration for participants in such a short period of time, but the

type of menial work performed also has little potential for skills transfer (in comparison, say, with projects in infrastructure development or the building of schools). The fact that all the respondents indicated that the job creation targets of the Municipality were only partly achieved shows that the Municipality has fallen short of its original EPWP targets. A proper job should be ongoing work that allows people to achieve their right to a decent life – which can scarcely be said of the very brief working opportunity that most EPWP workers in the study experienced.

While the EPWP policy does acknowledge its limitations in addressing the chronic structural unemployment problem, reaching its objectives would enable it to make a significant difference in providing work and training. In practice, the degeneration of the programme into a stop gap source of temporary work, with little associated training or empowerment, raises serious questions about its practicability. Triegaardt (2007) lists the following five fundamental limitations of the EPWP:

- the average duration of these EPWP jobs is only four months;
- there is only a limited number of learnerships available, providing limited training (8-12 days), although individuals do obtain life skills training;
- the supply of unemployed low- and unskilled workers exceeds the demand for work;
- the EPWP will not provide sustainable employment; and
- the EPWP will not provide long-term employment, and thus is not a credible response to the unemployment crisis.

In South Africa, public works programmes have traditionally been run by national and provincial government and various degrees of previous success have been reported (see Mubangizi, 2004). In a study of the public works programme in Mvenyane, Mubangizi (2004) recommended that decentralisation and the involvement of local government would go a long way in responding to implementation challenges. This study has shown that decentralisation or involvement of local government in public works programmes does not necessarily tackle the fundamental problems, although its findings do suggest possible recommendations for more satisfactory attainment of EPWP objectives.

## Recommendations

For more effective implementation of the eThekweni EPWP, the following recommendations may be considered:

- **Institutional arrangements:** eThekweni Municipality could consider incorporating the EPWP in its institutional organogram and appointing permanent staff members who will be responsible for planning, leading, organising and controlling EPWP implementation.
- **Budget:** The Municipality should ensure that all EPWP sectors are incorporated into both the Integrated Development Programme (IDP) and Service Delivery and Budget Implementation Plans (SDBIP), and that both capital and operating budgets are allocated to the EPWP. In this way, budgetary constraints of the programme will be borne by mainstream activities of the Municipality. This being said, the contribution of the Department of Labour through channels

such as the Skills Development Levy needs to be stepped up. The Municipality will have to aggressively lobby the Department of Labour in this regard.

- **Communication:** The driving line managers and government departments (national, provincial, district and local) need to re-align their responsibilities and coordinate their roles to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of the EPWP. It is suggested that all spheres of government concentrate on creating a system of regular communication to establish a clear understanding of what is expected of them in relation to implementing the EPWP. A proactive step in this regard would be to establish direct linkages with the national EPWP Unit, whose responsibility includes programme design and offering technical support in the implementation of the EPWP.
- **Job creation:** The EPWP drivers for the Municipality need to identify long-term employment opportunities rather than short-term jobs which often don't serve the purpose of the Programme (that is, developing skills for future work or self-employment). Respondents' accounts of 'achieved targets' tend to simply be justifications of where money was spent, with little being said about empowerment of people or job sustainability. It is therefore important for the Municipality to reconsider the duration of job contracts to give recipients of the EPWP more lengthy work exposure in the jobs provided. In this respect, the infrastructure sector is probably the most important in job creation because it normally provides longer-term contracts and has the potential to absorb a large number of low skilled beneficiaries.
- **Database:** It is suggested that a database be created with details of all participants who have been offered training, and who have been appointed or gained formal or informal skills while on the EPWP. This database could then be used to select people who have acquired skills in various sectors to be considered for minor work/tenders within the Municipality, should these arise.
- **Training:** Training should be provided to each participant in the Programme, and this should be linked not just to the skills required for the job, but to life skills such as CV writing, basic financial management, basic literacy, information on how to apply for loans, and so on. This would enable workers to leverage their skills to create their own jobs and potentially employ others down the line. Crucial to the success of this training endeavour are all the above factors – proper institutional recognition of the EPWP; adequate financial resources; proper communication around the aims and implementation of the Programme; longer-term jobs in which skills can be adequately practised; and a database providing details of participants and the skills they can offer to prospective employers.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** The given percentages for the achievement of targets were extremely low, revealing that targets were not achieved. Among all the respondents, not one confirmed that targets were fully achieved. It is, therefore, recommended that the Municipality try to set achievable targets and ensure that its implementation plan/strategy is reviewed annually.

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