

Programmes and Strategies Targeting Gender and Poverty Reduction in South Africa: A Case Study of Three Service Departments

SITHABILE NTOMBELA AND HARSHA DAYAL¹

Abstract

This article emanates from a broader research project that sought to explore 'new models' and innovative ways of thinking and dealing with poverty. Using an interpretive research paradigm and multiple case studies, this article seeks to establish if a common understanding of poverty exists within government departments. A case study of three national departments was identified for the enquiry. One of the critical questions that the study wanted to answer is: How do these departments conceptualise and address the impact of poverty? Findings show that there is an aggregated understanding of poverty within departments and they also indicate that poverty intersects with gender. This article concludes that although South Africa has made significant strides in entrenching equality in the Constitution, institutions of the state and in policy documents, gender inequalities in all aspects of life continue to negatively impact on the quality of women's lives.

Key words: Gender, poverty, inequality, women and access.

Sumário

Este artigo resulta de um amplo projecto de pesquisa que procurou explorar 'novos modelos' e formas inovativas de pensar e lidar com a pobreza. Usando um paradigma de pesquisa interpretativa e estudos de casos múltiplos, o artigo procura compreender se existe um entendimento comum de pobreza dentro dos Departamentos Governamentais. Para isso, como caso de estudo para o inquérito, foram identificados três departamentos nacionais. Uma das questões críticas que o estudo pretendia responder é: como esses departamentos conceptualizam e lidam com o impacto da pobreza? Os resultados do estudo mostram que há um entendimento agregado da pobreza dentro dos departamentos e também indicam que a pobreza é relacionada ao género. Este artigo conclui que, apesar da África do Sul ter feito avanços significativos em incluir a igualdade na Constituição, nas instituições do estado e nos documentos de políticas, as desigualdades de género em todos aspectos da vida continuam a afectar negativamente na qualidade de vida de mulheres.

Palavras-chave: Género, pobreza, desigualdade, mulheres, acesso.

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Background to the study

Poverty is a worldwide malady that has been around as long as humanity itself within sub-Saharan Africa, one of the most affected regions. In 2005, the Development Bank of South Africa estimated that there are nearly two million people living in poverty (Triegaardt, 2006). However, poverty is not easy to pin down as there is no absolute agreement on how to measure it. It is therefore not surprising that Statistics South Africa (2007) defines it as the absence of adequate resources to meet basic needs while others, (Dayal, 2008; Momsen, 2004; Chambers, 2006; Laderchi, Saith & Stewart, 2006) explore a more holistic approach in their definition, emphasising its multidimensionality. Chambers (2006), in highlighting the slipperiness of the concept, indicates that its meaning depends on who is asking the question, how that question is understood, and who answers. For example, Oosthuizen (n.d.) asserts that although in the past, poverty was measured in monetary terms only, it is now conceptualised and measured in terms of individuals' and households' ability to meet their basic needs and to participate meaningfully in their societies.

The impact of poverty is so great on the lives of those affected that in 1998, South Africa (SA) held a 'Poverty Hearing' process which highlighted the gendered nature of poverty experiences (Bennett, 2008). Similar claims are made by Triegaardt (2006) who argues that one of the dimensions of poverty and inequality is gender, adding that there is a concentration of women in the unemployed and the poorly remunerated groups. Likewise, The Hunger Project (THP, 2009) asserts that although women tend to be responsible for meeting their families' basic needs, they "are systematically denied the resources, information and freedom of action they need to fulfil this responsibility". The latest UNIFEM Report (UNDFW, 2008) corroborates that poverty intersects with gender, particularly when women are excluded from decision-making processes. Although research shows that in South Africa, gains have been made in terms of women's empowerment and gender equality in the areas of educational attainment and political representation, 60% of the poorest people remain women and girls (UNDP, South Africa, 2009). This, in spite of evidence pointing to potential gains when women are empowered:

Studies show that when women are supported and empowered, all of society benefits. Their families are healthier, more children go to school, agricultural productivity improves and incomes increase. In short, communities become more resilient (THP, 2009).

The relationship between gender and poverty

Although indigenous people, the homeless and immigrants tend to be most affected by poverty, there is evidence that women are the most affected and that their experiences of poverty differ significantly from those of men. As a result, Bennette (2008) argues that because a life of lack



(resources, services, employment, and agency) is experienced differently by men and women, poverty is gendered and that it is of necessity that poverty reduction/eradication efforts also be gendered. It is in this vein that the UNIFEM Report (UNDFW, 2008) maintains that poverty and gender reinforce each other. Similarly, Fukuda-Parr (2006) asserts that poverty is a result of different interconnected deprivations that support each other, adding that although economic growth and redistribution are important for poverty eradication strategies. What is more critical is direct intervention in arrears like education, removing discrimination, and ensuring social justice. International instruments like the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to measure the extent to which government departments are aligning to the broader developmental agenda and are useful to reflect on national efforts. MDGs 1 and 3 specifically outline targets and indicators to reduce poverty and promote gender equality, but many African countries were already lagging behind by 2005.

In southern Africa, gender inequalities is a measure of human development as it is entrenched in cultural, economic, political and social dimensions, thereby gendering poverty (Lopi, 2004). It is in the light of such realities that the UNIFEM Report (UNDFW, 2008) calls for women to be represented at different levels of decision-making. Countries like Tunisia have already heeded this call by establishing several institutions for women that advocate for, or advise government of, women's issues (Madzivha, 2008). South Africa too, is said to have seen a dramatic increase in the employment of women in professional occupations, management, and other senior positions as a result of the country's commitment to the Beijing Platform for Action (Casale & Posel, 2005). However, this claim is refuted by Mbanjwa (2008) who reports that a survey conducted by the Office of the Presidency highlighted the under-representation of women at senior management levels in both private and public sectors. There is also evidence that gender hierarchies determine how resources are accessed while gendered labour divisions promote the feminisation of job opportunities developed to service better resourced environments (Lopi, 2004; Bennett, 2008). As a result, women tend to be marginalised in micro-economic situations, particularly in matters of decision-making. Therefore, Cakata's (2008) proposal that women be included in all decision-making processes if poverty eradication programmes and strategies are to succeed, is justified.

South African realities

Poverty reduction in South Africa has increasingly become a priority with the realisation that there is a need for a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy. Previously, the South African government did not target poverty directly, rather as a programme for which resources were allocated within National Treasury. One of the major criticisms of government has been that there was no coherent strategy to reduce poverty.

Taylor (1997) argues that the only way to improve women's quality of life is through social transformation that is underpinned by basic economic change. The decade following the first

democratic elections saw a dramatic increase in the number of women participating in the country's labour force (Casale & Posel, 2005). However, they conclude that significant gender imbalances still remain because women are concentrated in poorly paid work and because they have limited access to resources (Casale & Posel, 2005). The same sentiments were expressed by members of the Office of the Presidency during a debate held in Pretoria early in 2008 (Mbanjwa, 2008). She further cautions that although women's quality of life had improved since 1994, their economic position and levels of violence against them were still unacceptable, and that even government programmes aimed at promoting women's empowerment and reducing the impact of poverty have failed to deliver (Mbanjwa, 2008). It must have been in response to such realities that the Office of the Presidency established the Ministry for Women, Children and People with Disabilities in 2009. This restructuring demonstrates the political will to put gender issues on the national agenda, but the degree to which this newly established ministry will be able to influence policy across sectors and direct gender mainstreaming, still remains to be seen.

Although government seems concerned about the state of women's affairs, some of its policies are seen as counterproductive. For example, Triegaardt (2006) cites a World Bank Report of 2006 that states that South Africa has the highest income inequality, in spite of all its pro-poor policies. Similarly, Sewpaul (2005) claims that the government's adoption of Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) in 1996 worsened the historical inequalities and increased the poverty gap, rendering women (African women in particular) "victims of the state's economic policy" (Sewpaul, 2005:107).

South Africa, being ranked ninth out of 130 countries in 2008 by the Gender Gap Index for political empowerment, demonstrates the gains made in terms of political representation by women, but there are concerns that power and the reallocation of resources have not moved the structural forces with regards to women's oppression (Triegaardt, 2006). She further contends that only elite women have benefited from political inclusion whilst poor women's issues have not been addressed. To tackle some of these challenges, Sewpaul (2005) suggests that government needs to decommodify essential services like education, health and water and introduce a basic income grant, arguing that the latter would narrow the income gap by nearly 74%.

The research process

The study specifically attempted to answer these critical research questions:

- How are marginalised and vulnerable groupings (particularly women and children) targeted within programmatic work (and policy)?
- How do programmes directly target such groupings?
- How is poverty conceptualised within such programmatic work and policy?



To address the above questions, three government departments were surveyed, namely, Social Development (DSD), Education (DoE), and Trade & Industry (DTI). A descriptive and analytic qualitative methodology was utilised, namely document analysis as well as in-depth individual interviews with high ranking personnel. An attempt was made to get two participants per department (but this was not always possible) working in the area of gender and poverty reduction within these three national departments. Participants were selected on the basis of their connectedness to units that deal with gender issues. Interview data was taped, transcribed and then analysed using the research questions as themes. All ethical requirements were met to the satisfaction of Research Ethics Committee within the Human Sciences Research Council.

While this research project highlighted that there is a mixture of sectoral policies as well as targeted programmes to reduce poverty, the reality in South Africa and other countries is that experiences of poverty are gendered, with more women affected than men. Therefore, a gendered analysis of national policies and programmes can help us to understand why these may not have the desired impact or outcome. If such is the situation in South Africa, what are service departments doing to improve the quality of women's lives? The project focused on three service departments to establish how they conceptualise poverty, address its impact and whether programmes and strategies were used to target gender.

The gendered nature of poverty

Overall, the findings confirmed the gendered nature of poverty as reflected by the programmes aimed at poverty reduction and/or eradication for which these departments have been established. Findings also reveal how these departments conceptualised and responded to the challenges of poverty and how their programmes target gender.

Department of Social Development (DSD)

It is clear that poverty is inter-generational and runs deep in social structures, particularly the economic, political and social systems. To eradicate poverty, it will be necessary to address its core by confronting and dealing with its structural dimensions. It was in this vein that in 2000, the Department of Social Development, after consultation with stakeholders, identified ten priorities that needed to be addressed, namely, violence against women and children; older persons and other vulnerable groups; an integrated poverty eradication strategy; a comprehensive social security system; accessibility of social welfare services; HIV/AIDS; youth development; service to people with disabilities; commitment to co-operative governance; and training, educating, re-deploying and employing a new category of workers in social development (DSD, 2009). Some of these priorities are in line with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and have been translated into programmes. Programmes that specifically target gender and poverty reduction are discussed below.

Social assistance in the form of grants

The DSD is concerned with the welfare of those marginalized or disadvantaged by poverty. As such, it provides social assistance grants, as a poverty reduction strategy and is a major programme of cash transfers within government (Triegaardt, 2006). The DSD reports that just over 12 million people were recipients of social assistance grants by April 2007, with specific categories of foster-care; care-dependency; war-veterans; old-age; disability; child-support; and grant-in-aid (MediaClubSouth Africa, 2009).

The Old Age Pension is the oldest social grant. It is a monthly grant paid out to senior citizens who have limited financial means of survival. In many households, this is the only income. Similarly, the Child Support Grant (CSG) was introduced in 1998 as a poverty alleviation strategy “to address the financial need aspect of the burden felt by women with young children” (Budlender, 2005:33). This is reportedly the state’s largest social assistance programme targeting caregivers of young children aged 15 years and younger who live in extreme poverty through cash transfers (UNICEF, 2008). Budlender (2005) reports that by March 2004 there were over four million children in receipt of CSG, and of these, less than 1.5% had a male primary caregiver. This highlights two things: that the responsibility of childcare falls mostly on women and that they are more affected by poverty than men.

The Disability Grant is usually given to people who are over 18 years old and, because of physical or mental disabilities, are unable to work. People with AIDS also qualify for Disability Grants if they are declared medically unfit to work. This grant is usually given for short periods and is renewable, depending on the status of the applicant, but can be given for longer periods where the disability is clearly of a permanent nature (AIDSbuzz, 2009).

Social Relief of Distress Grant is in the form of food parcels given to beneficiaries of the other grants when their grants are suspended or have not yet been renewed to tide them over for periods not exceeding six months.

Partnerships

All these grants are invaluable in the department’s fight against poverty and they continue to improve the quality of recipients’ lives, particularly that of women. However, they do not empower women for sustainable livelihood. To address this shortcoming, the National Development Agency (NDA), a statutory body, has been established to contribute towards eradicating poverty and its causes. This agency aims to accomplish this by facilitating development through targeted grant funding, research and strategic partnerships (NDA, 2009). The pillars of its strategic plan for 2009 to 2012 are the promotion of sustainable development, promotion of organisational sustainability, promotion of interface between civil society organisations, research institutions, develop-



ment practitioners and government on development matters, and to facilitate research that informs funding decisions, procedures and policies in development (NDA, 2009:17-21).

In addition, the DSD prioritises community involvement as expressed by the following participant:

Before, we were asking for food parcels, but this time around our approach is one of ensuring that when we define a project scope, which is done with the community. There is adequate participation, there is adequate determination in terms of what sort of inputs are required to see a particular community rising above its mediocrity and poverty... (Mr C, DSD).

Sometimes inter-sectoral collaboration becomes necessary:

The global food banking network is comprised of some partners locally: Agriculture, Water Affairs and ourselves. We are trying to develop food banks across the country. Food banking outlets ensure that we can then facilitate the transportation of food from retail outlets to poor communities (Mr C, DSD).

Department of Trade and Industry (DTi)

The DTI is also conscious of the marginalisation of women, youth and people with disabilities in terms of access to finance. As such, it has initiated several programmes aimed at improving the lives of women. One of these is the South African Women Entrepreneurs' Network (SAWEN). This is a networking forum for women entrepreneurs and aspirant entrepreneurs established in response to women's frustrations in initiating, developing and sustaining their business ventures. SAWEN brings together individuals and organisations committed to supporting the progress of women in business while promoting their access to information, resources and business opportunities. Its focus is on facilitating and monitoring women entrepreneurs' socio-economic advancement, their contribution to the country's economy, as well as tackling the challenges they face (DTi, 2009).

SAWEN is responsible for mobilising women entrepreneurs, those who are aspiring to be businesswomen just to bring them under one roof, for them to network and share business ideas... we use SAWEN to implement some of our interventions... we just say SAWEN, here is the proposal, can you assist us in implementing this? (Mr M, DTi)

Another initiative, the Isivande Women's Fund (IWF), launched in February 2008, was prompted by the existence of gender bias within financial institutions. IWF seeks to eradicate poverty by increasing women's access to formal finance, especially those with no personal savings. It

provides low interest loans to women who are in business and those who lead households (DTi, 2009). Through this Fund, the DTi seeks to increase the economic empowerment and participation of women by making finance available to them that is accessible, functional, and inexpensive.

The DTi conceptualises poverty as the absence of opportunities as stated by the following participants:

The primary objective is to make sure that these women are economically empowered.... to make sure that the lives of women improve... to make them economically emancipated (so) they do not rely too much on government grants or their husbands' salaries (Mr M, DTi).

Poverty is also viewed as lack of access to services and/or resources:

... the recently established Isivande Women's Fund targets women entrepreneurs, the SMMEs and small and micro-enterprises. This is a loan at a very, very low interest rate, prime less than 5, which you'll never get from any commercial bank (Mr M, DTi).

The DTi is also promoting the establishment of cooperatives among communities, ensuring that communities, particularly women, understand what these are and how they can benefit from them.

We make sure that the members of the community, those who are not aware of what cooperatives are, know what their benefits are and we encourage them to form these. Through cooperatives they can alleviate poverty (Ms K, DTi).

Through the establishment of IWF the DTi seeks to eradicate poverty by improving the lives of women in business and those leading households:

The recently established IWF is a loan at very, very low interest, prime less than 5... The DTi has developed a strategic framework on gender and women's empowerment, the main objective is to ensure that women are economically empowered (Mr M, DTi).

Through this fund, the department makes finance more accessible to women, thereby accelerating their economic empowerment. There is built-in support and empowerment to ensure that applicants do not fall through the cracks:

When you submit the first time and they find that you have left out something, they cannot



throw it (application) away and say this one does not meet the requirements. They call you or write a letter and tell you to take note of 1, 2, 3 and resubmit. When you resubmit (and you have addressed the queries) they approve (Ms K, DTi).

Realising that fighting poverty requires intersectoral collaboration, the DTi has forged partnerships to promote and support women in business.

The Department of Agriculture assists us in terms of training these women, making sure that they know the dynamics of how to conduct business in the agri-business. So we sometimes depend on other sister departments to implement some of our interventions (MrM, DTi).

Those who cannot read and write we refer to SEDA (Small Enterprise Development Agency) where they sit down with them and they can explain to the consultant in their vernacular that this is what I'm aiming to do... then they (consultants) put it in the required format and submit it (Mr M, DTi).

Department of Education (DoE)

The DoE's systemic approach is to ensure greater access to educational opportunities and to ensure that children are getting quality education (DoE, 2001). During the interview, it emerged that the DoE's intervention programme for poverty reduction is based on three pillars: school feeding, food gardens and nutritional education. Within these programmes, women are encouraged to take an active role through cooperatives as expressed by the following participant:

Well, we also have capacity building workshops, where we train the food handlers. We call them volunteer food handlers. Those are the mothers, the unemployed mothers that are employed by schools to actually prepare and cook for learners. Now, they undergo training in food safety, health and hygiene, you know, just to be aware of certain things that are important, so that we give quality service to learners. So we provide them with training workshops on these issues and we encourage them to have improved service delivery (Ms Z, DoE).

Asked if this applies to women only, she noted that the majority of unemployed people in communities where these projects take place are women and that neither she nor her colleagues had come across any men, thereby confirming the gendered nature of poverty.

One other strategy that is used to curb poverty by this department is that of scholar transport. In brief, all provinces basically have some form of school transport strategy. It however, differs from province to province. Almost all the provinces supply transport to ensure that children get to schools. Some other schools are beginning to create hostels or utilise schools where they've had hostels in the past to provide easier access to education for children from very rural areas.

On issues of collaboration with other sectors, the official noted that they do work with a number of departments, including Agriculture, Health, and Water Affairs. She noted that all the sister departments have a role to play in promoting the aim of these programmes:

As I indicated, the Department of Agriculture is one of them and the Department of Health. Now the department of Health are the ones that originally conceptualised or rather they started to manage the programme (feeding) when it was conceptualised in 1994. They are the ones that have provided us with guidance. We consult with them on issues of food quantities, what nutrition information and products must be made available at school level. We also consult them if there are challenges or problems regarding food contamination. We involve them when we do training for food quality or rather food specifications – let me put it that way. Ja, we still consult them quite regularly ...We do have Agriculture, we do have Health, we do have Social Development. Water Affairs not to a great extent, but we do meet at some point. For example if a school doesn't have water and they want to develop the school garden, then we will need to talk to them at some point; or the municipality for that matter. So we do have quite a wide variety of sister departments that we collaborate with. Even National Treasury, too, because that is where the funds come from (Ms Z, DoE).

Asked about the school level implementation of the Policy on School Nutrition, Ms Z indicated that the programme was initially intended for primary schools (Grade R-7), but since April 2009, it had been extended to secondary schools. The Constitution informs the legislative framework that guides this programme:

Well the Constitution itself says a lot. I mean, we have section 28 of the constitution, which says basic education is embedded in a whole lot of things, isn't it. You have to provide the child with health; you have to provide the child with nutrition in order for the child to have basic education. You know, they go together. So the constitution is the pinnacle of what drives this programme...You are aware that conditional grants are ring-fenced for a certain purpose. So this one is for poverty alleviation or whatever term you may use. So it somewhat regulates how provinces should spend that money. So they are not supposed to



spend that money for any other purpose, except for giving children meals at schools. So it somewhat governs the manner in which we do our work (Ms Z, DoE).

What challenges do these departments face in addressing gender in poverty?

Analysis of the findings demonstrates that for the DoE, human resource shortages are the main challenge to implement poverty reduction programmes effectively. For the other two departments, the lists were longer.

The location of the DTi, (CIPRO particularly) in Pretoria with no provincial offices, seems to be a huge barrier, especially for people in rural areas, when it comes to the registration of cooperatives:

My recommendation is that the registration of cooperatives be decentralised, that people be in a position to register cooperatives in their provinces and not come to Pretoria. ... Sometimes people from rural areas come here and the form is not filled in properly, maybe some of the directors did not sign and they have to go back to get those signatures. At least if it was done in provinces [this would not be such a problem] (Ms K, DTi).

We are quite aware that there is a high rate of illiteracy amongst women, and when most of them come here, they know nothing about developing business plans (Mr M, DTi).

Within the DSD, challenges are around implementation:

What needs to be improved is implementation. If there are programmes that have been suggested for implementation in the policies, those are the things that we need to concentrate on (Ms S, DSD).

Overcoming bureaucratic red tape is a challenge in both DSD and DTi departments.

Unfortunately, I think within the department there isn't any legal framework... that guides the department. Maybe that is one shortcoming that we have – you establish a particular unit but there is no founding document (Ms S, DSD).

People out there... they depend on us to make sure their things are being processed and you'll find that this is beyond our control. It has to go through this process – must get eight signa-

tures for the application to be approved, so there is nothing to do with this red tape (Mr M, DTI).

We need to concentrate on the popularisation of the policies so that people know that we have these policies in place and how they can use them. Most of the time we have them writing, but it does not help much (Ms S, DSD).

What do we learn about gender and poverty reduction programmes in these departments?

It appears that the understanding of poverty in South Africa is still evolving from a material asset-based approach towards the concepts of agency and capabilities. The understanding of poverty intervention is moving away from the provision of cash transfers and social services to a more developmental approach. Since grants are targeted, the approach by Government is shifting from a system which excludes many people, towards actually providing a more comprehensive service towards people. Social grants – in the form of child support grants – remain the most effective strategy to combat poverty over the years, with a positive impact on improving the lives of women and children directly, as demonstrated through the improved nutritional status of children who receive this form of state aid. While the take-up rates were slow in the initial phase of its roll-out, a spurt in the growth of grant beneficiaries is reported to be a result of relaxing the eligibility criteria and an increase in the actual amount. Although the eligibility criteria include all caregivers, i.e. mothers, fathers or other extended members of the family, women remain the largest recipients of cash transfers.

While there may be a positive bias towards women in targeted anti-poverty programmes and that South Africa has very good legislation and programmes in place, the roll-out of these programmes to impact on women directly is negatively affected by lack of adequate resources. It is also clear that business literacy among women is very low, as Mr M of the DTi indicated. This implies that literacy programmes must include basic business skills if women are to be encouraged to explore available opportunities in business.

Conclusion

Although South Africa has made significant strides in entrenching equality in the Constitution, institutions of the state and policy documents, gender inequalities in all aspects of life continue to negatively impact the quality of women's lives. During an ANC debate on the budget vote in 2004, a DTi position paper was highlighted with the following, which still applies today:

...societies characterised by entrenched gender inequality, racially or ethnically..... defined



wealth disparities, are not likely to be socially and politically stable, particularly as economic growth can easily exacerbate these inequalities.

African National Congress speeches.

<http://anc.org.za/ancdocs/speeches/2004/sp0610h.html>

Findings indicate that there is a common understanding of poverty within the three government departments. As such, they have initiated several programmes and strategies to reduce poverty with the understanding that it is women who bear the burden of poverty. This common understanding can lead these sectors in the right direction to be able to positively impact on poverty reduction, given the recognition of higher numbers of women affected. However, what the findings do not show is that in South Africa, the intersection between race, class and gender results in negative outcomes for black women.

Despite the initiation of targeted programmes specifically addressing the needs of women, it is a cause for concern that the GINI coefficient as a measure of income inequality is rising in South Africa. While it is important that productive resources are transferred to those in extreme poverty and that their access to these is increased, the crunch is in ensuring that in the formulation of policies (economic, political and social), a gendered lens is applied at all levels of analysis. This is not feasible without reviewing the positions women occupy socially, which ultimately depends on the involvement of women. It is hoped that various forums will identify creative and effective ways of giving women a voice, and ways of starting serious dialogues regarding gender inequalities and how these can be targeted through poverty reduction programmes.

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