

# Vukuzenzele projects for poverty reduction in rural spaces: a gender perspective

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**Abstract:** Self-help groups have been initiated as a basic approach to accelerate collective socio-economic development among women, especially in poverty-stricken or marginalised communities. This article provides a content description of how women practice self-help savings to sustain their livelihoods within rural space for poverty alleviation. Sustainable Livelihoods(SLs) theory is adopted as core discussion with emphasise on Africanism. The narrative of *vukuzenzele* implying hassling to make a living was established to create space for women to discuss issues that affect them in their individual households and in the community at large, the element of hassling for survival is emphasis of the project done by rural women, therefore the sense of Africanism is combined with sustaining of livelihoods of women in this discussion. The Sustainable livelihoods theory is designed to assist communities to come up with sustainable ideas that will lead to money generating activities by forming self-help groups. These Self Hep Groups (SHGs) participate in savings mobilisation, which are conducted on weekly or monthly contributions depending on the agreement and affordability of the group members. From these savings, the SHGs then resume a sustainable programme of income generating activities that foster mutual aid and social cohesion. Women of Eshowe in the rural community of Nkanini, Kwa Khoza, Mombeni and eNtumeni, engaged in this self-help projects. They began with two rands savings and gardening projects which manifested as successful. These women began to cope feeding their families, taking children to school, buying school uniform, and it has progressed to the level where they build houses from the two rands savings project as they have named it and they have managed taking children to tertiary institutions.

The objective of this paper is to reflect on strategies employed by rural women to create economic sustainability for survival of their families therefore a feminism theory has been associated to women's perspectives towards poverty reduction. Methodological a qualitative approach was employed in this '*Vukuzenzele*' project. Thematic description of women voices is visible in this article. Theoretically an adoption of Sustainable Livelihoods (SL) is unpacked and focus on poverty reduction strategies in rural villages is reflected on. Findings are described as reflection of the study; the effectiveness of women, practising self-help to sustain families in their rural space ponded on. "*Vukuzenzele*" as self-help is evident among these women. The self-help groups (SHGs) described as "*Vukuzenzele*" showcased sustainable economic resilience, empowerment and sustainable strategies that have been instilled and progressively applied by these women in the rural spaces within Eshowe under the uMlalazi Municipality.

**Keywords:** Self-help, savings, rural space, sustainable livelihoods, Vukuzenzele and poverty reduction.

## Introduction

The issue of Gender base violence and rurality focuses on complex issues. Moletsane and Ntombela (2010) [1] have expressed that many people in South Africa are still waiting for the promised social change to come. The situation is grimmer for those citizens living in rural spaces of the country. The community is living with cases such as extreme poverty, disease including HIV and AIDS, crime including gender-based violence and poor service delivery[1].The '*vukuzenzele*' project was initiated by the Nelson Mandela Childrens fund (NMCF) with the intention to alleviate poverty reduction in rural communities with a specification to women development. It was for

this reason that engagement with women in the rural space community of Eshowe in the Nkanini, kwaKhoza, Ntumeni and Mombeni community got involved in self-help projects. This project was monitored by the KwaZulu Regional Christian Council (KRCC). The Self-help groups initiative as was formed targeting women in their rural spaces. This was an opportunity for women to be involved in economic empowerment through savings mobilisation for them to eradicate poverty in their families and be in a position to manage and sustain their livelihoods within their rural spaces. The Nelson Mandela Children's Fund agenda is to support self-help projects in all nine provinces of South Africa.

In their quest to work with women in rural communities, the organisation (NMCF) envisaged a long-term vision of changing the way society treats children and young people, therefore this programme self-help was initiated based on poverty eradication, savings mobilising that can sustain livelihoods. Reference to the Sustainable Livelihoods(SLs) theory was adopted as core discussion with emphasise on women perspective. The narrative of 'vukuzenzele' implying "do it yourself" associated to hassling to make a living was established to create space for women to discuss issues that affect them in their individual households and in the community at large, the element of 'vukuzenzele' hassling for survival is emphasis of the project done by these rural women, therefore the sense of Africanism is combined with sustaining of livelihoods of women in this discussion.

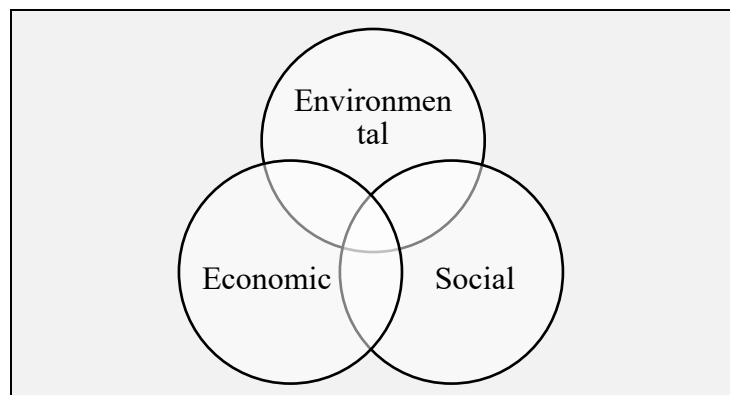
### Poverty reduction in rural space

Gender inequalities and the traditional social status of women in rural communities in particular, women and girls are the victims and even more negatively[1]. The vukuzenzele project attended to these questions in a guest to get answers. What does gender mean in Southern African rural contexts? How does women as gender sustain their livelihoods to influence different people's lives in rural spaces? What kinds of interventions have been employed by the identified community to mitigate the negative impacts of gender and rurality and their intersection with other social identities? Engaging in the "Vukuzenzele" project called for contributions that explore concerns related to poverty reduction in a rural space. The self-help initiative was dominant amongst women in the communities of Nkanini, KwaKhoza, Mombeni and eNtumeni. The theory sustainable livelihoods was linked to the Vukuzenzele project. The Sustainable livelihoods theory is designed to assist communities to come up with sustainable ideas that will lead to money generating activities by forming self-help groups. The livelihood approach focused very much on how people organised their lives.

To eradicate poverty, these women have created a self-help group (SHGs). These Self Hep Groups (SHGs) participate in savings mobilisation, which are conducted on weekly or monthly contributions depending on the agreement and affordability of the group members. From these savings, the SHGs then resume a sustainable programme of income generating activities that foster mutual aid and social inclusion. They began with two rands savings and gardening projects which manifested as successful. These women began to cope feeding their families, taking children to school, buying school uniform, and it has progressed to the level where they build houses from the two rands savings project as they have named it and they have managed taking children to tertiary institutions.

Sustainable Livelihoods theory or approach is deposited as an approach that improves understanding of the livelihoods of the poor. The theory organises the factors that constrain or enhance livelihood opportunities and shows how they relate. The sustainable livelihoods approach comprises of these elements.

**Figure 1. Elements of Sustainable livelihoods**



The elements of sustainable livelihoods depict the contribution of activities that make up the communities' livelihoods. Serrat, (2017) [2] deposits that the theory does not replace other tools, such as participatory development, sector-wide approaches, or integrated rural development. However, it makes the connection between people and the overall enabling environment that influences the outcomes of livelihood strategies.

[2] elucidates that the sustainable livelihoods approach facilitates the identification of practical priorities for actions that are based on the views and interests of those concerned but they are not a panacea. This theory brings attention to bear on the inherent potential of people in terms of their skills, social networks, access to physical and financial resources, and ability to influence funding institutions. "Ukuvukuzenzele" amongst the women of the rural community of Eshowe is being promoted by this approach. The narrative vukuzenzele emphasises to wake up and fight for yourself to make a living in this context.

The sustainable livelihoods theory is about helping communities to organise the factors that constrain or enhance livelihood opportunities and emphasises on how self-help group members relate to one another. Engaging with the Eshowe rural women, it was evident that in rural communities, different households have different access to livelihoods assets. The livelihood assets comprise financial and human capital, which is basic need to nutrition, education. The savings mobilisation introduced by NMFC, gave knowledge, skills for survival capacity that permitted the rural women to work and adapt to sustaining lives.

The values and behaviours demonstrated by the women of this savings and self-help projects have instilled a common understanding of rules in the project vukuzenzele and has formulated a mechanism for participation in decision-making. The women leadership for vukuzenzele self-help group has installed these values to group members. There is an element of vulnerability which is characterised as insecurity in the well-being of individuals, households, and communities in the face of changes in their external environment. Sampson, (2007) [3] reveals that vulnerability captures the processes of better chances of survival within the communities and measures to eradicate poverty. Vulnerability in this context is directed to conflicts amongst self-help project members. Issues associated to weather conditions that negatively impact the project such as floods, storms, droughts, pests, and diseases indicated vulnerability. Sickesses caused by pandemics such as COVID 19 that affected the group members was vulnerability. The sustainable livelihoods approach stresses the importance of understanding communities.

### **Challenges encountered by women in rural spaces**

The 'Vukuzenzele' women had no financial support, this caused a significant threat to the success of self-help groups. These challenges of income and cash flow performance disrupted the progress of community development initiatives (Ferraz et al., 2019) [4].

South Africa's economic landscape is in a downturn rural spaces face yet another challenge of inadequate and less developed infrastructure, which hinders the planning, implementation, and maintenance of various projects (Njogu, 2021)[5]. The poor participation of the youth in acquiring skills from the 'Vukuzenzele project is a major concern. The general observation was the mobility of the youth to city lifestyle in to find employment and a 'better life'.

(Sweidan, 2016[6]; Murad & Alshyab[7], 2019; Rugaza, 2022[8]) allude that political instability can disrupt the continuity and effectiveness of community development programs, impacting their sustainability and outcomes. Eshowe as a town has been somehow affected by political instability. The dominance of a particular political party not favoured in certain municipal wards, to a certain extent, contributed to the discontinued or slow community development and thus led to undelivered community-needed resources[5]. Additionally, the use of top-down approaches without meaningful community participation can lead to dissatisfaction and hinder the success of development projects (Arifai et al., 2023[9]; Zacarias, 2019[10]). Lack of financial resources has opened up a vacuum in rural areas. Infrastructure such as roads is concern in rural communities. The absence of proper infrastructure planning and maintenance can hinder the delivery of essential services and limit the overall development potential of communities. Moreover, the correlation between community satisfaction and infrastructure development underscores the importance of addressing infrastructure challenges to ensure positive community outcomes [9]. These challenges of essential resources hinder successful implementation of projects in South Africa (Dithebe et al., 2019) [11].

### **Reflection on Vukuzenzele project**

The narrative of Self-help "Vukuzenzele" generally translated to 'getting up and do it for yourself' which is synonymous to *hassling* has found expression in the findings of the study, wherein the strength of each woman is placed in the collectiveness of activities where women in the absence of economic support, could reason together and motivate one another to 'ukuzenzela' meaning do it for yourself. Engaging with the community in this project has

proven that *'vukuzenzele is an epitome of women's mental and physical strength'* in producing food and monetary support for the livelihood of their families/ community. The posture of the women's thinking and action of not relying on the minimum or no support from the government is evidence of a strategy and power to reinvigorate and restore the narrative vukuzenzele in their lives, families and communities.

Sustainability and restoration of livelihoods of women in rural spaces in this regard extends to a broad spectrum on the women's lives, viz., culture, heritage, ethics, toxic masculinity, history, [in]equality, access, and capacity. The findings of the study sheds light on the manifestations of the latter restorative and sustainable elements in the lives of the women who participated in the vukuzenzele initiative. History, culture, [in]equality and toxic masculinity have been the daily struggles that women have faced. [1] affirm that gender inequalities and the traditional structures and posture in the rural areas undermine the status of women and girls. The culture that denies women access to land and equality, saw the vukuzenzele initiative attracting the traditional council led by Inkosi (chief of the clan) to providing women permission to plough and grow vegetables for the vukuzenzele group. The proceeds have enhanced their monetary gains, feeding, clothing, educating their children and building and renovating their family homes.

Findings of the study reflect the effectiveness of women, practising sustainable measures to take care of families in their rural space. The self-help groups described as vukuzenzele showcased sustainable economic resilience, empowerment and sustainable strategies that have been instilled and progressively applied by the women in the rural communities within Eshowe.

Furthermore, the findings of the study affirmed the Self-help groups attesting to the Vukuzenzele outcome on the effectiveness of (i)healthcare, (ii) reduction of economic stress, (iii) access to education, (iv) clothing and school uniforms. In addition, the traces of the challenges/stress of sustaining the self-help groups are still visible and articulated by women. The savings and generation of cash have led to the improvement of the health of children, lowered mortality rates and enhanced livelihood. (Fernald et al., 2017[12]; Cleveland, 2018[13]) attest to that women tended to bond more as they worked together and spent more time voicing out their struggles and finding advice and solace from the other women.

The women of the *'vukuzenzele project'* received training on how to build cement concrete, and aluminium-lined water tanks, a skill that was extended to the schools in their communities; providing freshly preserved water for consumption for learners and the community. Poverty reduction and livelihood improvement through various interventions, including income generation activities, infrastructure and facilities development. These findings underline the importance of community development approaches that address economic, social, and educational aspects to achieve sustainable poverty reduction and livelihood improvement. Sugiyono (2021) [14] expresses the positive results of the improvement of infrastructure and facilities development in education as it impacts educational outcomes.

### **Gender perspective on poverty reduction**

The self-help groups that were engaged with in the *'Vukuzenzele project'* had women only. These women cited reluctance towards involving males as they wanted to overshadow what they do as women. The study adopted feminist theory hence most self-help groups are women's initiatives that also address gender issues. As a result, these groups are dominated by women and are skeptical that if men are involved, they might experience gender discrimination and stereotypes which can cause instability in the group. The feminist theory supports the view that due to the inequality perpetuated in communities between men and women can cause conflict even in self-help groups and poor relationships may result among the group members (Egbert & Sanden, 2019) [15]. Feminist theorists argue that these women's initiatives provide a space for women to voice their concerns and challenge traditional power dynamics that have historically suppressed women. Through these groups, a supportive space for women to come together is being provided by mobilising themselves to work towards overcoming structural and societal barriers and sharing experiences that hinder them from achieving financial dependence. Lopez-Sanchez et al (2022)[16] mentioned that differences can be observed through men's savings patterns and in terms of accessing loans hence women contribute more than men in these groups. Enimu, Eyo, & Ajah (2017) [17] cited in Nakato (2021) [18] concur with the above authors that inconsistencies in savings have been observed in male savings group members.

In addition, Enimu et al. (2021)[19] indicated that women do not have confidence in males and this low level of trust makes women skeptical of issuing loans the male group members and also pointed out that males joined the groups with a hidden agenda, and they don't feel ashamed of the penalties of their poor loan repayment. Therefore, these groups are seen by those advocating for the feminist approach as valuable tools for social cohesion and empowerment among women well-established social associations also help during times of need because the members who are

enterprise owners can borrow from them. For that reason, self-help women's groups are viewed as a form of resistance against isolation as it promote collaboration, networking, interconnectedness, and community-building among women. In addition, this informal economy gives opportunity to community members who feel the financial burden or who want to improve their lives to get involved as long members adhere to the ethical standards of the group. Economic independence is a key factor in women's empowerment, as it enables them to have control over their own lives and make choices that benefit their well-being. When women have the means to support themselves financially, they are less likely to be dependent on men for their livelihood, and that reduces their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse.

The above argument is also supported by Lukhele (2018)[20] who confirms that women manage these initiatives very well as compared to males and there is more trust and solidarity when self-help groups comprise women. D'Espallier et al (2010)[21] are of the view that the perception of existing mistrust of repayment on the male side is the key challenge facing group members. On the other side, SEEP (2019) [22] opined that there is a perception that male repayment of loans is poor and are not afraid of consequences that might result from poor repayment of loans. However, the mentality that males are trustworthy, and defaulters is the main reason for males not to get involved in these groups, and their support for women who are involved in saving groups is low (Eskesen et al, 2014).[23] Feminist theory advocates for policies and practices that support women in achieving financial independence and self-determination and Rantso (2022) [24] supports the view of well-established institutional support and enabling policies to create a more equitable society where all individuals can thrive economically.

## Conclusion

The practice of 'Vukuzenzele' has mobilised women of Eshowe rural space to mobilise towards savings and this initiative has assisted the women of this area to be able to take care of their families and be in a position to sustain their livelihoods. Social cohesion has been identified among 'Ukuvukuzenzele' self-help groups, and what keeps them succeeding is that there are terms and conditions set regarding accessing the savings. The *Vukuzenzele* groups at Eshowe rural spaces is an important initiative because various projects that have been developed and these women have become influential in other neighbouring rural communities. As a result, participation in Vukuzenzele project self-help groups changed the aspirations of low-income individuals and become more determined. The women involved in this project are optimistic and are imagining a new future for themselves and their children. Women are sole owners of the project and take pride from their achievements. The promotion of such projects is anticipated towards building a better South Africa where women are respected and applauded with respect from the good work that they engage in. Collaboration instils society involvement and social inclusion.

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