

## **POVERTY ALLEVIATION, SOCIAL PROTECTION POLICY AND SUSTAINABILITY OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATIVES: VOICES OF WOMEN RESIDING IN BHAMBAYI, KWA ZULU-NATAL, SOUTH AFRICA**

### **ABSTRACT**

This is one of a series of articles which endeavors to advance empirical data in the field of social protection policy and feminization of poverty. Using participatory action methodology, the author presents evidence from 24 women who implemented three economic development cooperatives spearheaded by the University of KwaZulu-Natal Community Outreach and Research Organisation. Underscored by social justice, asset-based and sustainable livelihood frameworks, the author presents their biographical profile and discusses two themes; intrapersonal challenges, power and group relations which were perceived as obstacles to the sustainability of the projects. This article concludes with considerations for enhancing the sustainability of economic development cooperatives.

### **INTRODUCTION**

This article is part of a broader study that was conducted in a low income community in 2014 in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, which examined the human capacity and economic benefits of single mothers who embarked on economic activities to supplement their household income received from state social grants (Raniga & Ngcobo, 2014; Raniga 2016). Since the inception of the new democracy in 1994, social protection policy has been legislated to ensure basic human rights and to provide a safety net for citizens during times of shock and/or crises (Social Assistance Act, amended 2008). At the end of 2016, in South Africa a total of 17 million people had benefitted from cash transfers through the payment of social grants (Social Assistance Act, amended 2008). Empirical evidence from qualitative studies conducted in the Bhambayi community by Raniga and Simpson (2011), Raniga and Mathe (2011) and Raniga and Mthembu (2016) revealed that such cash transfers increased food security, school attendance and economic decision making power in female headed households. At the same time, these studies concluded that the monthly income received from the state cash transfers were grossly insufficient to assist women to break the cycle of poverty and to transition from the second economy to the first economy. Raniga and Ngcobo (2014) concluded from a pilot qualitative study conducted in 2014 with 25 single mothers residing in Bhambayi, that it is imperative that government, non-governmental organisations and the private sector affirm women's involvement in economic development cooperatives

through providing opportunities for funding, psychosocial support, relevant marketing and training within and outside their communities.

In this article the author presents qualitative experiences of 24 women engaged in three economic development cooperatives in a low income community in KwaZulu-Natal using a combination of asset-based community development (ABCD) and sustainable livelihood frameworks. The data distilled provides insight into the women's biographical profile and discusses two key themes identified as obstacles to the sustainability of the economic projects, namely intrapersonal challenges and power and group relations. The findings allude to the limitations of a neo-liberal economic model in espousing the values of social justice and a people-centred development paradigm. The article concludes with suggestions to strengthen associations and forums for women entrepreneurs as a fundamental option to promote the sustainability of economic development cooperatives in low income communities in the Global South. The paper begins with a review of some contemporary debates related to gender relations, economic development and poverty reduction in communities. The second section deliberates theories such as asset-based community development, sustainable livelihood approach and social justice and its relevance for the purposes of this study. Section three outlines the research methodology followed by presentation and discussion of the biographical profile of the participants and two key themes. The final section of the article synthesizes the women's reflections and highlights key implications for the sustainability of economic development cooperatives that are relevant for social work and community development practice.

## **CONTEMPORARY DEBATES RELATED TO GENDER, ECONOMIC COOPERATIVES AND POVERTY**

Proponents of leftist thinking argue that the negative consequences of economic globalisation (Sewpaul, 2013; Sewpaul, 2016; Patel, 2015) espoused by market forces and fuelled by consumerism, greed and private sector interests has had dire consequences for women in the labour market and has contributed to increased feminisation of poverty. The Global Agenda for social work and social development acknowledges that the "past and present political, economic, cultural and social orders, shaped in specific contexts, have contributed to high levels of poverty and inequality, human rights violations and an unsustainable natural environment both within and across nation states in the Global North and South" (Global Agenda, 2012:1). With the global economic downturn many nation states have questioned the legitimacy of global capitalism and debated implications on how to reform and/or construct social protection systems which would help the poor to break the cycle of poverty (Midgley & Piachaud, 2013). Women's economic poverty is highlighted by the UN Statistics that revealed

that women represent 70% of the world's poor. The South African National Department of Social Development, (2015) provides empirical evidence that female-headed households are more likely to be poor and experience nutritional and food insecurity in comparison to male-headed households. Furthermore, the National Department of Social Development Strategic Plan revealed that females head 41, 2% of all households and in historically poorest provinces of Limpopo (49, 2%), Eastern Cape (44, 7%) and KwaZulu-Natal (43, 5%); most female-headed households were without a single employed member compared to nearly one-fifth (19, 7%) of male-headed households (DSD Strategic Plan, 2015-2020). This is a justification for targeting women; in particular, female-headed households who are dependent on state grants, in economic development cooperative projects.

It is commendable that there has been legislations put in place to create a thriving and inclusive local economy that would address community resources, needs and contribute to meeting national development goals such as economic growth and poverty eradication. Foundational legislation such as the White Paper on Social Welfare (1997); the White Paper on Local Government (1998), the Cooperatives Development Policy (2005) and more recently the National Development Plan Vision 2030 (2015) are all geared towards achieving pro-poor and pro-economic growth objectives, thus simultaneously integrating psychosocial support and economic imperatives within impoverished communities. While the rollout of these policies is commendable; the gaps remain with translating these policy directives into meaningful women economic development intervention projects (Raniga and Ngcobo, 2014). To add to this complexity, female-headed households from low income communities face social and economic exclusion due to historical patriarchal institutions and sexual discrimination that is deeply entrenched in communities (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2017; Raniga & Ngcobo, 2014).

There is empirical evidence in Africa that economic development co-operatives have been a foundational mechanism to increase women's human capacity, their self-confidence and to tap into knowledge and skills that they inherently possess (Tesfay & Tadele, 2013). In countries such as Canada, Spain, Italy, India and Bangladesh cooperatives are perceived as an important strategy for the facilitation, coordination and integration of small social entrepreneurs, thereby giving poor women the opportunities for moving from the second economy into the mainstream economy (Chauke, Nekhavhambe, & Pfumayaramba, 2013). The South African Cooperatives Development Policy (2005:22) places much emphasis on "cost-effective, efficient and easily administrative self-help economic projects in low income communities" (Department of Trade & Industry, 2012). In fact the development of co-operatives is targeted at historically disadvantaged communities as a strategy to eliminate

poverty and equalise the first and second economy through job creation (Thaba & Mbohwa 2015). Women's involvement in economic development cooperatives is acknowledged as an effective intervention strategy for poverty alleviation in households (Raniga & Mthembu, 2017; Raniga 2016). The link between single mothers' income, decision-making power and food security is also evident as women are more likely than men to prioritise spending money on meeting the basic material needs of members in the household (Pankhurst, 2002). The combination of individual and group structure fits well with the discourse on globalisation from below which argues for the importance of localising economies thus increasing social justice and people-centred development and active civil society engagement (Midgley & Piachaud, 2013; Ife & Teseriero, 2006). Despite the arguments for economic development cooperatives, playing a very valuable role in poverty alleviation and women's economic self-reliance in low income communities; critics argue that ensuring the sustainability of cooperatives in the long-term is often an elusive goal. This article is an attempt to fill this empirical gap and contributes to the body of knowledge in two ways: providing a nuanced understanding of the challenges to sustainability of economic development cooperative projects from the perspectives of women in female-headed households and secondly encouraging academic debate about the feminisation of poverty in social work and community development practice.

## **CONCEPTUAL DEBATES ON SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD AND ASSET BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORKS**

The combination of asset-based community development (ABCD) and sustainable livelihood frameworks has proved to serve as valuable organising frameworks for social work and community development practice (Raniga, 2016; Schenck et al., 2013). These organising frameworks share a conceptual synergy with social justice and people-centred participatory development which encourages local people to take primary responsibility for driving social and economic development in communities (White Paper on Social Welfare, 1997). The central premise of this paper is that poor women who are dependent on state social grants have the capacity to thrive and aspire to become economically self-reliant by enhancing intrapersonal power, reducing group conflict and by mobilising existing assets and resources within and outside their own residential communities, thereby creating economic opportunities that will assist them to break the cycle of poverty. Writers such as Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), Patel (2015), Schenck, et al. (2013) identified five major capitals and resources necessary to achieve sustainable livelihoods in households and that will ultimately contribute to building stronger and socially cohesive communities. The first is human capital which includes work experience, skills, knowledge and the creative capabilities of people. The second is natural capital which refers to resources such as access to land, water, agriculture

and minerals. The third is physical capital which includes food, livestock, jewellery, tools, and machinery. The fourth asset is financial capital which refers to money earned through working in the formal or informal sector, savings in the bank or benefiting from state social grants. The fifth is social capital which was conceptualised by Putnam (2000) as social bonds, voluntary associations and quality of interpersonal relations among people within communities.

Critical theorists alert us to the limitation of the combination of ABCD and sustainable livelihood practices as they focus on the 'goodness of fit' in which households in poor communities attempt to sustain their livelihoods. Hence for the purposes of this study the researcher was also guided by social justice and thus paid attention to structural factors, such as socio-political and economic factors, beyond their control and yet have a profound impact on the lives of poor women. Hence, being aware of such structural complexities, the researcher has sought to provide insight into the connections between feminisation of poverty and sustainability of community economic development co-operative projects. All three frameworks share a synergy with the developmental approach to social welfare as they are based on principles of people-centeredness, active participation, holism, self-help as well as social and economic goals. Swanepoel & De Beer (2006) make an important point that in low income communities such as informal settlements, economic development cooperatives, organisational collaboration and positive social networks are systems that are vital to assist poor households to increase livelihood security and reduce vulnerability in times of threats and shocks. The researcher is of the view that the combination of ABCD, sustainable livelihood and social justice are valuable theories for social workers and community development practitioners to adopt to assist female-headed households to increase their human capital, financial capital, physical capital, natural capital and social capital in low income communities in South Africa (Raniga, 2014).

Using participatory action research methodology, a key objective of this study was to gain insight into women's perceptions about the factors that led to the failure of their respective cooperative projects in Bhambayi, North of Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. This paper presents the women's biographical profile and discusses two key themes which were perceived as obstacles to the sustainability of the economic development cooperatives, namely intrapersonal challenges, power and group relations. In the discussion of the findings, the researcher is mindful that understanding the women's perspectives and experiences necessitates an understanding of the complex interplay of socio-economic, gender relations that profoundly influences the quality of their daily lives. This article concludes with some considerations for enhancing the sustainability of economic development cooperatives.

## **Research setting**

Bhambayi is situated in one of the most impoverished regions in the province of KwaZulu-Natal and faces high rates of food insecurity, inequality and the devastating effects of AIDS, especially amongst female-headed households (Raniga & Motloun, 2013). As a consequence of the apartheid legacy, Bhambayi is predominantly inhabited by African, isiZulu speaking population. Historically, major economic initiatives prevented women with low literacy levels from entering the first economy and succeeding in the second economy (Raniga & Ngcobo, 2014). In November 2014 three economic development cooperative projects were formed to assist single mothers who were dependent on state social grants to supplement their household incomes. Eleven women were involved in the bead-making and sewing cooperative, nine women were involved in the garden cooperative and four women were involved in the construction cooperative. A key motivation for the implementation of the three economic development cooperative projects was that working in a team and as a collective would increase the women's productivity and support network. The majority of the women in the cooperatives had lived in the Bhambayi community for more than 10 years. It was not surprising that they were heads of their households and that they were dependent on state social grants and often had to deal with surviving on tenuous income strategies. A milestone for all three cooperatives was that in September 2015 they obtained registration with the Cooperative Development Unit of the Department of Trade and Industry.

## **PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH**

Consistent with the objectives of this study, participatory action research (PAR) methodology guided the data collection process as it offered the researcher and participants the opportunity to be empowered from the planning to the implementation of the research process. Marlow (2011) notes that there are three strategic aims for the use of participatory action research. The first intention is to increase knowledge and interventions that are directly valuable to groups of people. The second aim is to partner with the poor and value their local knowledge and expertise to address development needs in communities. The third aim is to promote active participation and collaboration between the researcher and the participants throughout the research process. Proponents of critical and transformative methodologies add that PAR endeavours to engage the participants in a process of empowerment and consciousness-raising throughout the research process (Baines 2007). This study endeavoured to enhance knowledge, transformative action and remedy power dynamics between the researcher and the participants through engaging the 24 women involved in three cooperatives in the conceptualisation of the research design, data collection and evaluation phases of the

research process. Marlow (2011:20) aptly indicates that this method “is particularly compatible with social work practice as the approach emphasises empowering systems of different sizes from individuals, groups and whole communities”. In so doing, the research process in this study focused on enhancing knowledge, income generating skills and human capacity development of the women; thereby enhancing self-confidence, self-determination, planning and implementation of the three economic development co-operatives in the Bhambayi community.

### **Sample**

Purposive, availability sampling was used to guide the selection of the women for this study. In 2014 the researcher met with 24 women who were involved in implementing their livelihood activities as a means to support themselves and their families (Raniga & Ngcobo, 2014). Eleven of the women expressed an interest to work as a team to form an economic cooperative. Nine women opted to initiate and implement a garden project while four women opted to get involved in a construction project. Hence four key phases comprised the selection process which was guided by Baines (2007) organizing framework for conducting participatory action research. Phase one entailed three four-hour training workshops with the 24 women from the respective cooperative projects. The purpose of these workshops were to provide knowledge and skills on the process of register co-operatives with the Department of Trade and Industry, sustainable livelihood and asset-based community development practices, team work and budgeting skills. Asset Based Community Development and sustainable livelihood frameworks provided the scope for reflection beyond technical-rational responses to help the women to tap into untapped assets in the community (Schenck et al., 2013; Raniga, 2014). In addition, it offered the women “an opportunity to put into practice pillar two of the Global agenda for social work and social development which advocates for a new world order through localising their economies and being rooted in promoting social justice and human rights in communities” Global Agenda (2012:3). Phase two entailed engaging the women in several meetings with stakeholders such as a German funder, the ward councillor, the community development officer employed by the Department of Social Development to discuss the objectives of the study and the ideological position of the researcher (Marlow, 2011). Phase three comprised training the women in ABCD practices and sustainable livelihood practices. The content of these training sessions comprised asset-mapping exercises, linking networks for economic development within and outside the community, project management skills, budgeting skills and marketing skills. Phase four comprised the evaluation phase which consisted of 24 in-depth interviews with the women to reflect on their experiences of being involved in the co-operative development projects.

### **Data collection strategies**

Two qualitative methods were used to collect the data: minutes of team meetings and interviews held with 24 women from the three projects. Verbal and written consent were obtained from the women to tape record interviews. Baines (2007:108) notes that: “action research which is grounded in feminist research declares that the researcher needs to create empathic connections with participants and be sensitive to how gender experiences and power relations permeate the research process”. Data was collected by the researcher and three social work students as well as one postgraduate student who had been doing field practice in the community. The advantage of this team effort was that the students and the researcher had well established relationships in the community and this prolonged engagement contributed to the trustworthiness of the data (Marlow, 2011). Trustworthiness was further enhanced by the multiple data collection sources (interviews and documentary analysis), peer debriefing (the women, the students and the researcher met weekly) and member checks (monthly meetings held with students and the women to discuss their experiences). All the interviews and training workshops were facilitated by the researcher and the content was translated by the social work students into isiZulu. It is important to acknowledge that it is possible that some meaning may have been lost in the translation from one language to another. A further critical part of the research process comprised secondary data generated through a literature review on the feminisation of poverty and policy analyses which focused particularly on the interface of social protection policy, gender relations and socio-economic relations.

### **Data Analysis**

The process of data analysis comprised the following three steps as put forth by Marlow (2011). The first step comprised ideological analysis of the findings in relation to relevant document and feminisation of poverty literature. Second through the empowerment process, all the women were engaged in discussions about patriarchal and gender oppression in the community (Raniga & Ngcobo, 2014) and the potential for economic self-reliance through their involvement in their respective co-operatives. Third and consistent with PAR, the researcher endeavoured to democratize the research process by not just making the transcripts of interviews and minutes of team meetings and training material available to the participants but they were given a safe space to reflect and engage on the transcripts as well as the emergent themes which are discussed in this paper. The study obtained ethical clearance from the UKZN Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee in 2014.



## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings presented were distilled from minutes of team meetings and individual face-to-face interviews with the 24 women. The discussion of the findings will be presented in two sections, namely:

- A biographical profile of the participants
- A discussion of two interconnected themes: intrapersonal challenges, power and group relations

Table 1 illustrates the biographical profile of the research participants

Participant Number	Age	Main source of income	Total grant income	Number of persons in household	Cooperative activity
1	52	1 Foster Care Grant + 1 Child Support Grant	R1180	5	Bead-making & sewing
2	28	1 Child Support Grant	R330	6	Bead-making & sewing
3	48	1 Child Support Grant + 1 Disability Grant	R1740	6	Bead-making & sewing
4	34	1 Child Support Grant	R330	3	Bead-making & sewing
5	34	1 Child Support Grant	R330	3	Bead-making & sewing
6	34	1 Child Support Grant	R330	5	Bead-making & sewing
7	31	Foster Care Grant	R850	5	Garden
8	62	OAP + Foster Care Grant	R2820	22	Garden
9	55	Foster Care Grant	R850	8	Garden
10	61	OAP + Foster Care Grant	R2820	4	Garden
11	63	OAP + Foster Care Grant	R2820	7	Garden

12	58	Foster Care Grant	R850	9	Garden
13	32	Foster Care Grant	R850	4	Garden
14	49	Foster Care Grant	R850	6	Garden
15	59	Foster Care Grant	R850	11	Garden
16	28	Foster Care Grant	R850	8	Construction
17	39	Foster Care Grant	R850	7	Construction
18	40	Foster Care Grant	R850	6	Construction
19	32	Foster Care Grant	R850	6	Construction
20	59	Foster Care Grant	R850	7	Bead- making & sewing
21	22	2 X Child Support Grant	R660	5	Bead making & Sewing
22	46	2 X Foster Care Grant	R1700	6	Bead-making & Sewing
23	52	Care Dependency Grant	R1410	13	Bead- making & sewing
24	40	Child Support Grant	R330	8	Bead- making & sewing

- The monetary value of the respective South African state grants at the time of data collection were as follows:
- Foster care grant R850, child support grant: R 330, old age pension, care dependency grant or disability grant: R 1410 respectively.

Three of the women were aged 20-30, seven were 31-40, five were 41-50, six were 51-60 and three were above sixty years of age (N=24). The mean age was 44. Participants reported that they were heads of their households and it was not surprising that in an impoverished community such as Bhambayi, that the average household dependency ratio was 7.

According to Statistics South Africa (2017) 41.36% of households are female-headed. This statistics is lower than the Census (2011) statistics which reported that 45.1% of the households in the country were female-headed. The Inanda node, in particular, is above the average (45.5%) for all other nodes in the eThekweni region in the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that all the women were in receipt of at least one state grant. Table 1 illustrates that the average household income was R 1076 per month which translates to 90 USD as per the rand dollar exchange rate at the time of data collection. All the women reported that there had no other income from economically active adults in their households and this infers that the monthly incomes were menial to cater for the increasing demands on food security and meeting the basic needs of minor children. Such tenuous monthly incomes thus served as a core motivation in March 2015 for all the women to get involved in the economic development cooperatives to supplement their household incomes and endeavour to break the cycle of poverty.

Eleven of the women were involved in the bead-making and sewing economic development cooperative, while nine were involved in gardening and four were involved in the construction projects respectively. The Department of Trade and Industry (2012) revealed that the declaration of the Cooperatives Act No. 14 of 2005 not just facilitated the registration of new co-operatives in the country but these projects allowed people from historically disadvantaged communities the opportunity to pursue and protect their livelihoods as part of a long-term support system that reduces vulnerability. In addition for women, such projects served as a motivation for them to 'step' up the economic ladder and break the cycle of poverty.

The participatory experiences of the women involved in the bead-making and sewing cooperative revealed that they were able to increase their individual and communal human capacity skills as a means to a much greater financial end. Their involvement in the project served to supplement their household incomes by mobilising existing assets and resources within and outside of their communities (Raniga, 2016). However it is important to take note of the conclusive evidence put forth by Greek researchers, Vakoufaris, Kizos, Spilanis, Koulouri and Zacharaki (2007) who indicated that co-operatives supporting group income-generating activities may lead to interactive complications and the failure of members to fully comprehend the inter-group relations of power and rights. The two following themes provide insight into these issues that led to the unsustainability of these three economic development cooperative projects.

## Structural challenges

It is widely acknowledged that single mothers are likely to face mental health problems compounded by economic disadvantage in the labour market (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2017; Raniga & Mthembu, 2017). During the interviews held with the 24 single mothers they talked about experiencing a triple disadvantage as they were expected to work three to four hours a day in the project, to put food on the table, while trying to balance their overwhelming domestic responsibilities of child care, cooking and cleaning. Consequently, self-employed women in impoverished communities continue to struggle to break the cycle of poverty due to multiple demands and daily stresses and find it hard to stay optimistic and motivated and to sustain their involvement in cooperative projects. One woman commented that *'I am forced to survive in these hard times and to push myself to go to work in the project'*. Participant 21 stated: *'I rather work as a domestic worker for seven hours a day and earn R150 than work in the project. At least I am guaranteed this money and can buy food for my children'*. Participant 16 also shared her dilemma of domestic and childcare responsibilities versus her commitment to the economic cooperative project: *'if only I could get help to care for my baby at home I would be able to attend the group meetings and work in the garden project'*. During the two year life span of the projects, a total of fifteen women had dropped off as they were apathetic and had more pressing survival concerns and they could not see the long-term tangible benefits of the project. Hence, even though there is an increase of women's positive experiences and participation in co-operative projects (Raniga, 2016), it was evident from the sentiments shared that some of the women faced difficulties with lack of childcare support and time management which hindered their commitment to the projects. This infers that economic projects that operate in a disabling environment where structural poverty and unemployment levels are high and where women find it difficult to market products in such an environment; contributes to the unsustainability of such projects. Furthermore, Pankhurst (2002) argued that economic projects that ignore the structural roots and inequalities created by neoliberal economic policies are bound to fail at a local level.

In South Africa the market-driven economic model in welfare has reinforced the subordination of poor women and inhibited their transition from the second economy to the first economy. Raniga & Ngcobo (2014) provides qualitative evidence that women lack confidence and negotiation skills to help them gain access to funding and bank loans to sustain their livelihood activities. This corroborates with the sentiments shared by many of the women in the cooperative projects who felt strongly about the lack of support provided by local government to market their products within and outside the Inanda region. Moreover cooperative projects are a form of group income generating which is market-driven, cost-effective, efficient and

relatively easy to administer. Such goals are underscored by neo-liberal capitalism which has a tendency to undermine social and cultural practices that are valuable to local communities (Ife & Teseriero, 2006). Thabethe & Uzodike (2013) writing about women's experiences in agriculture, revealed that in situations where markets have not been identified for those who have been excluded from the mainstream economy and who are expected to find their own markets, will unintentionally mistrust and disempower each other thus leading to systemic and reinforced exploitation amongst the group members. The political economy of the market needs to be acknowledged as some of the single mothers felt frustrated that only those women who had access to human capacity development (additional training), literacy skills and had strong social associations were able to thrive and economically benefit from their involvement in the cooperatives.

Another contentious and connected issue that was raised by the women in the interviews and which hindered the sustainability of the economic development cooperatives was that of power and group relations. This theme is discussed further below.

### **Power and Group Relations**

Proponents of social justice and people-centred development such as Swanepoel & De Beer (2006), Ife & Teseriero (2006), Pyles (2009) and Ledwith (2005), Schenck et al. (2013) aptly stated that economic development cooperatives offer their members the best of both worlds since the combination of team work and individual reward, fits well with participatory democracy and valuing local community self-help initiatives. However, it is important to take note of Thabethe & Uzodike's (2013) argument that despite African women's increasing participation in economic projects; existing gender inequalities perpetuate when interpersonal conflict between women exist. Participants 5, 7, 23 and 11 commented:

*"I can't trust the Treasurer, the last time we sold products to international visitors we did not get our share of the profit"*

*"We had two sewing machines donated to our project but now it sits in two members' homes who refuse to share it with us"*

*"These two members went for quilt training and they were supposed to train all of us but this did not happen"*

*"Some of the women do not get along and refuse to come to the weekly group meetings"*

Raniga (2016) argues that it is important to take note of the real costs of economic development cooperatives which includes the stresses and strains of maintaining group cohesion and the issue of power relations between members. It was evident from the interviews that much of the group conflict existed as a result of envy that some of the women felt towards those who had opted to attend additional training (quilt making in the sewing cooperative, commercial farm training), had secured additional household physical capital (sewing machines), were able to attract other contractual work and benefitted from the distribution of income generated from products sold within the projects. Many of the sentiments shared by the women who had dropped off the cooperatives was that there was no consistent tangible means of supplementing their monthly household income and that the products hardly generated sufficient profits to boost themselves and their children out of poverty. A sad outcome of this study was that all three economic cooperatives failed to sustain as a result of these complex intrapersonal, group relations and structural factors. The findings corroborate Midgley's (2015) suggestion that successful realisation of economic development goals requires promoting microfinance and microenterprise as part of a holistic development agenda to address the feminisation of poverty.

It further demonstrates that social workers and community development practitioners must consider socio-economic issues within the wider context of the community. Hence it is imperative for practitioners to engage in dialogue and advocate action for change to national and international economic policies. Poverty alleviation strategies related to women's daily struggles requires a more holistic approach, based on a more grounded overview of the contradictions and power relations that women face in the second economy.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Claims about the effectiveness of economic development cooperative projects as a key antipoverty strategy for poor women to supplement household income in the Global South has been widely acknowledged. While these projects have indeed helped to supplement household income as a means to break the cycle of poverty, the contention that such projects are able to sustain in the long-term in poor communities in the Global South is questionable. This article discusses the factors that led to the failure and unsustainability of three economic development cooperatives initiated in a predominantly informal settlement in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. The available data suggests that cooperative projects operate at the micro-economic level without giving attention to the structural reasons for poverty and inequality that exists in communities. What was interesting in this study was that the women were disillusioned by structural challenges and power and group conflict which they perceived as

obstacles to the sustainability of the projects. The findings corroborate other South African research by Thabethe and Uzodike (2013) which revealed that structural and interpersonal expectations constrain women from exercising all their capabilities and from valuing each other's attempt to succeed in the second economy.

On the basis of these conclusions the following recommendations are made to enhance the sustainability of economic development cooperatives in low income communities:

- In tackling the feminization of poverty a more holistic approach is needed which links the macro and the micro economic contexts as well as social workers and community development practitioners advocating for a social democratic economic agenda.
- Lobbying by social workers and community development workers to collaborate with other development stakeholders doing similar work such as ward councilors, government policy makers and private sector companies is vital for a multi-level and holistic social development response.
- It is essential to monitor projects closely to ensure transparency and accountability by project managers of economic development cooperative projects.
- This study represented a limited sample of 24 African women from an impoverished community and does not represent other population groups in contemporary South Africa. This clearly warrants further quantitative and qualitative research to be conducted with a mixed race profile to explore the experiences of women involved in economic projects across various provinces in South Africa.

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