

Evaluation of indigent exit strategies in selected metropolitan municipalities in South Africa

¹Joyce T. Ringane, ²Mzikayise S. Binza & ³Ricky M. Mukonza

Abstract

This paper explores the implementation of Municipal Indigent Exit Strategies (MIES) in the City of Tshwane and Johannesburg, South Africa, designed to provide poor residents access to basic municipal services and help them transition from indigence to self-sufficiency. The study evaluates whether the objectives of the MIES have been achieved and how these strategies contribute to poverty alleviation. This study was therefore aimed at assessing the indigent exit strategies used by the two metros in Gauteng, and also the perceptions of the municipal workers in the indigent departments for the two metros on the indigent exit strategies. In order to address the primary objectives of the study, semi-structured interviews with municipal officials in the senior management of the indigent programmes (Directors, Deputy Directors, Managers, Social services employees) from Johannesburg Metro and Tshwane Metro were employed for collection of qualitative data. Eight senior officials were interviewed from the two metros, and were recorded using MS Teams platform. Framework analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data from the interviews. The results of the study revealed that the two metros made a great effort to develop the indigent exit programmes which includes training and skills development for the indigents. While the programmes for the Johannesburg Metro are still running, the indigent exit strategies have stagnated, and therefore not offering much to its inhabitants currently in terms of empowerment. However, both programmes showed major shortcomings in terms of tracking of the indigents, and monitoring and evaluation of the impact of the different strategies used by the municipalities to empower the indigents. The study concluded that the national government should help guide the municipalities in the development of a framework for implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of the impacts of interventions that the municipalities are employing to enable them to support the initiatives of the national government towards poverty and extreme poverty eradication.

Keywords: *metropolitan government, poverty alleviation, municipal indigent exit programmes, indigents, monitoring and evaluation*

Article History:

Received: December 19, 2024

Accepted: August 28, 2025

Revised: August 27, 2025

Published online: October 27, 2025

Suggested Citation:

Ringane, J.T., Binza, M.S. & Mukonza, R.M. (2025). Evaluation of indigent exit strategies in selected metropolitan municipalities in South Africa. *International Review of Social Sciences Research*, 5(4), 43-65. <https://doi.org/10.53378/irssr.353272>

About the authors:

¹Corresponding author. PhD. Faculty Research Officer, Department of Public Management, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria, SA. Email: ringanejt@tut.ac.za

²PhD. Director, Academic Enterprise and Services, The Central University of Technology, SÁ. Email: mbinza@cut.ac.za

³PhD. Associate Professor in Public Affairs & Academic Manager, Department of Public Management, Tshwane University of Technology, Polokwane, SA. Email: mukonzarm@tut.ac.za



1. Introduction

When poverty and inequality levels are high, governments develop social security systems to mitigate poverty and provide access to municipal services. Social Security Services (SSPs), such as social grants for vulnerable groups (children, people with disabilities, pensioners, war veterans, and the unemployed), are crucial in alleviating poverty (Hall & Sambu, 2018; Mangole et al., 2018). These grants often determine who qualifies for Municipal Indigent Exit Programmes designed by local governments to ensure that poor residents can access basic services. However, ensuring sustainable access to these services and graduating indigents from the indigent register requires realistic poverty alleviation programmes. Globally, poverty and inequality remain pressing challenges, with 8.6% of the population living in extreme poverty on less than \$1.90 a day as of 2020, particularly in developing countries where vulnerable communities make up a large portion of the population (World Bank, 2020; Betz, 2022).

The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), established by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015, aim to eradicate extreme poverty globally. The SDGs focus on reducing poverty in all its dimensions, implementing social protection systems, and developing measures to protect vulnerable populations (United Nations, 2015). Since their implementation, significant progress has been made, with extreme poverty, measured by those living on less than \$1.90 a day, falling from 44% in 1980 to 8.2% in 2019 and projected to reach 7.4% by 2021 (United Nations, 2015). However, the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2019 worsened poverty eradication efforts by causing widespread economic devastation due to global lockdowns (Onyeaka et al., 2021). As a result, the progress made in reducing extreme poverty was reversed, with 9.3% of the global population estimated to be living in extreme poverty as of 2021 (Aguilar et al., 2021).

While global poverty rates were declining, the situation in Sub-Saharan Africa presented a more complex picture. Between 2000 and 2018, the number of people living in extreme poverty in the region increased from 392.1 million to 433 million (Schoch et al., 2020). This indicates that despite global improvements, the region continues to face significant challenges. Tackling poverty, especially in such regions, requires not just government efforts but also partnerships with the private sector to create jobs, which is critical for achieving the SDGs related to poverty alleviation.

In South Africa, the government has invested heavily in social infrastructure and has developed one of the most extensive social security systems among developing countries (Fuo, 2014; Ramnath, 2015). Several programmes have been implemented to alleviate poverty, including cash grants provided by the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA). These grants target vulnerable groups such as children, people with disabilities, the elderly, war veterans, and the unemployed (Hall & Sambu, 2018; Mangole et al., 2018). Social grants have increasingly become a primary source of income for many South Africans, with social assistance spending exceeding 4% of the country's GDP in 2014 (World Bank, 2015; Seekings & Natrass, 2011).

As part of its broader anti-poverty strategy, the South African government introduced the National Framework for Municipal Indigent Policies (NFMIP) in 2005. This programme aims to assist those unable to afford municipal services by providing targeted support (Department of Provincial and Local Government, 2005). However, the sustainability of these indigent programmes has become a challenge. Indigents cannot remain on the register indefinitely, even if they continue to face economic hardships (Reuters, 2018). Municipalities, together with provincial and national governments, were tasked with developing realistic poverty alleviation programmes and “indigent exit strategies” to help individuals graduate from the indigent register when their circumstances improve (Mangole, 2018; Reuters, 2018).

The goal of these exit strategies is to ensure that indigent populations can sustainably access municipal services and, over time, become financially independent. This would reduce the burden on the government while ensuring that municipal services are provided fairly. However, the implementation of these strategies has been difficult, especially in a country where high unemployment, low skills development, and slow economic growth are prevalent (Bhorat & Cassim, 2014; Mashaba, 2015; World Bank, 2015). Fraud has further complicated the situation, with professionals being found on the indigent register, thus illegally benefiting from programmes meant to help the poor (Mashaba & Saurombe, 2023). This mismanagement undermines the sustainability of the system, as municipalities end up paying for services for people who are not truly in need.

While South Africa's social assistance programmes have made strides in alleviating poverty, the sustainability of municipal indigent policies remains in question. Without realistic exit strategies, the burden on the government could become unsustainable. Moreover, the question remains whether indigent populations can maintain access to services without

accumulating debt once they graduate from the register. Failure to empower these individuals could lead to them falling back into poverty, thus negating the progress made. Sustainable poverty alleviation will require addressing these systemic issues, ensuring that only those truly in need benefit from social programmes, and providing pathways for individuals to become self-reliant (Fuo, 2014; Leburu, 2017; Mangole et al., 2018).

In the current economic climate, characterised by high unemployment, poverty, and inequality, developing such strategies is challenging (Mtapuri & Tinarwo, 2021). This study assesses the indigent exit strategies used by Johannesburg and Tshwane municipalities in Gauteng, drawing on semi-structured interviews with eight senior municipal officials.

2. Literature Review and Conceptualism

The discussion in this section focuses on poverty and how poverty alleviation programmes have been implemented in South Africa. The focus is on the implementation of the National Framework of Municipal Indigent Policies by the JHB and Tshwane metropolises, and on the design, implementation, evaluation, and monitoring of the Municipal Indigent Exit Strategies of the respective metropolises. The discussion is placed in the context of programme theory.

Programme theory consists of an implicit set of assumptions that steer the choice and design of an intervention based on how the planners expect the intervention to work (Van Belle et al., 2010). It represents a hypothesis that can be tested and further refined. Interventions with underlying programme theory address issues about how they work, for whom, and under which circumstances, so they will be better able to adapt to work with rather than against different services, individuals, and settings. It provides the basis for monitoring and evaluating the intervention to assess whether the intended impacts are being observed and ensures that the monitoring and evaluation process measures the right aspects of implementation quality and quantity. An evaluation that employs programme theory allows evaluators to distinguish between implementation failure and theory failure (Funnel & Rodgers, 2011). According to Pope et al. (2019), the measurement of programme quality is essential to successful programme evaluation, and the description and measurement of quality emerge from programme theory. More recently, programme theory has been advocated as a tool to help reviewers of complex interventions, such as municipal indigent programmes and policies, to better understand “what works for the indigents and the municipality, and under what circumstances” it works (Maden

et al., 2017). For this study, programme theory was employed for the critical evaluation of the indigent exit strategies implemented by the two large metros in South Africa. It is considered an extremely useful theory that brings together existing evidence about a programme, clarifying where there is agreement and disagreement about how the programme is understood to work, and where there are gaps in the evidence. It can be employed to improve the intervention or to find alternatives for achieving intended outcomes. It also influences the choice of the type of evaluation to conduct and strengthens the validity of subsequent evaluations (Sharpe, 2011; Jones, 2015).

2.1 State of Poverty in South Africa and the Interventions Employed by the Government

For South Africa, being a signatory to the SDGs of 2015, the alleviation of poverty and extreme poverty by addressing inequality and improving the socio-economic status of South African households has remained one of the major priorities of the government since the end of apartheid (Bhorat & Van der Westhuizen, 2012; Tissington, 2013). While the country has made significant progress in addressing these socio-economic challenges, it is still a developing country and continues to suffer the severe effects of poverty and extreme poverty that were partly inherited from the apartheid system. The harsh economic conditions following COVID-19 continue to affect the country (Ramnath, 2015; Stats SA, 2017; World Bank, 2018). In South Africa, as of 2022, 18.2 million people were living in extreme poverty based on the international community's definition of \$1.90 a day (Cowling, 2023). According to the country's money-metric poverty lines, 55.5% (33.1 million) of the South African population live below the national poverty line, while 25.2% (15.0 million) live in extreme poverty (below the food poverty line) (Stats SA, 2017). To this day, South Africa retains the unwanted title of the most unequal country in the world, with a Gini score of 63, which highlights the magnitude of the socio-economic challenges in the country (Mtaputi & Tinarwo, 2021). It is imperative that the government find solutions to mitigate inequality, poverty, and extreme poverty because of their adverse effects on the well-being of the affected population.

South Africa has employed various context-specific poverty alleviation instruments as a way of addressing the triple challenges of high unemployment rates, poverty and extreme poverty, and high inequality rates. One of these instruments, which is the subject of this discussion, is the Municipal Indigent Programme (MIP), which aims to address specific

challenges faced by the indigent. According to the Guidelines for the Implementation of the National Indigent Policy by Municipalities, an indigent person is one who is “lacking the necessities of life” (Department of Provincial and Local Government, 2005b). The national government developed the National Framework for Municipal Indigent Policies and the implementation guidelines, which the local sphere of government would employ as a foundation to operationalize their own programmes by constructing and executing their own indigent policies. According to the implementation guidelines, the necessities of life are guided by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, and include sufficient water, basic sanitation, refuse removal in denser settlements, environmental health, basic energy, health care, housing, food, and clothing. The free basic municipal services afforded to indigent households include refuse removal, water and sanitation, and electricity. The development of this policy complemented other poverty reduction policies developed by the government to provide free social services, such as the free basic health and free basic education policies.

According to the National Framework for Municipal Indigent Policies, municipal indigent policies can be financed through a number of sources, such as cross-subsidies from non-residential and high-income people, taxes on large corporations operating in various local municipal areas, the equitable share grant from the national government, and property rates and taxes (Department of Provincial and Local Government, 2005; Fuo, 2014). Despite these listed possible sources of funding, most municipalities, especially those in rural areas, do not have sufficient funds to provide all indigent households with the prescribed levels of essential services. Allocations from the national government are also often inadequate to address the financial shortfalls experienced by some municipalities (Department of Provincial and Local Government, 2005b, p. 17).

2.2 The Guidelines for the Implementation of Municipal Indigent Policies

The sustainability of the municipal indigent programmes brought a difficult reality to the fore, that indigents could not remain on the register for life, irrespective of whether one remained indigent in some way or another. The municipalities, in conjunction with the provincial and national governments, were therefore tasked with the responsibility of developing realistic poverty alleviation programmes (indigent exit strategies) that would enable indigents to graduate from the indigent register (Department of Provincial and Local Government, 2005a; 2005b). This would ensure sustainable access to municipal services for

indigent populations and the graduation of those whose socio-economic circumstances have improved significantly, enabling them to pay for municipal services without accumulating debt. This would, in turn, avoid backlogs while minimising the unfair provision of basic services to those who should not be on the register (Fuo, 2014; Leburu, 2017). The government was concerned about the increasing future cost of free basic services since the structure of the municipal indigent support programme, as a social package, relies mainly on government financing for its sustenance, as well as the fear of a dependence syndrome among the poor (Potts, 2012).

Some guidelines on the development of indigent exit strategies are provided in the Municipal Indigent Framework and the Implementation Guidelines. According to the Guidelines for the Implementation of Municipal Indigent Policies, the indigent exit strategies must accomplish the following main objectives: Eradicate poverty through the provision of economic opportunities to indigents and encourage a work culture among them; Provide a mechanism for tracking and evaluating indigent households to determine when they should be graduated or removed from the indigent register so that the provision of services remains sustainable; Provide a platform to engage and stimulate a variety of stakeholders to actively contribute to poverty reduction through the provision of economic opportunities and other support programmes to help those in need; Provide a means of linking beneficiaries to other local, provincial, and national poverty alleviation programmes; and Provide a means to track and evaluate the impact of various strategies on indigents and an opportunity for reflection on what is working and what is not (Department of Provincial and Local Government, 2005a, p. 33; 2005b, p. 25).

According to the Constitution, Section 152(1)(c), local government is required to provide services “within its financial and administrative capacity” and “to promote social and economic development” to ensure the growth and development of the local economy (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). Therefore, to achieve long-term sustainability of the programmes, municipalities needed to find innovative ways of equipping indigents to be self-sustainable and to provide more funding for the programmes. However, planning realistic exit strategies for indigent households under current socio-economic conditions, generally characterised by high unemployment, low skills development, and constrained economic growth, is very difficult. Linking beneficiaries with national poverty alleviation programmes already implemented, such as the Expanded Public Works Programme

(EPWP), national skills development programmes (learnerships and SETAs), and Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET), could greatly benefit the poor who otherwise have no access to such programmes through proper targeting of indigents.

It should be noted that the municipal indigent support policies developed by different municipalities require municipal services to be provided to those in need who qualify as indigents. The provision, however, does not emphasise empowerment strategies to promote the self-sufficiency of both the young and the economically active indigent and the municipality. Registration and acceptance of the provision of free basic services are not attached to any preconditions for the provision or continuation of the benefits. This has allowed a number of municipalities to initiate basic service provisions without developing indigent exit strategies. Besides listing envisioned exit strategies such as “skills development,” “training,” “LED activities,” and “empowerment programmes,” the municipal indigent policy documents of various municipalities generally lack detail on how these ideas would be operationalised and achieved (City of Johannesburg, 2008; City of Ekurhuleni, 2018). While some municipalities, such as the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, made significant attempts to develop pragmatic indigent exit strategies (Pillay, 2010), they nevertheless lacked detailed mechanisms to effectively implement the programmes (Mashego, 2015).

An observation from the study by Mashego (2015) highlighted the lack of evidence to inform and support the decisions on strategies and empowerment opportunities proposed to the community, and questioned whether these would have an impact on the livelihoods of indigents, especially those in informal sector businesses. In some policy documents, indigent exit strategies are not discussed at all, e.g., the Stellenbosch Municipal Indigent Policy (Stellenbosch Municipality, 2020) and the eThekweni Municipality Indigent Policy (City of eThekweni, 2020). For a number of municipalities, the emphasis has rather been on the conditions for exiting the programme rather than on empowerment. In most municipal policy documents, there is evidence of the imposition of onerous preconditions, such as regular re-registration, on households, thus keeping large numbers of poor households off the list and ensuring their exit without realistic indigent exit strategies.

For example, an indigent could exit under the following conditions: the death of the account holder, relocation of the account holder or household, voluntary de-registration by the account holder, or de-registration after a social worker evaluated the household (City of Tshwane, n.d., p. 6; City of Ekurhuleni, 2018). For the City of Johannesburg, the provision of

free basic services is queried every quarter in the system using the ID to monitor changes in the poverty index score (City of Johannesburg, 2008), while the website (City of Johannesburg Services, n.d.) shows that an application for re-registration should be made every six months. This most likely creates a logistical nightmare, resulting in excessive administration that could impact those who need help. The City of Tshwane and the City of Johannesburg provide services for 24 and 36 months, respectively, after which an evaluation should be performed to decide whether one should be exited or remain on the indigent register; otherwise, the beneficiaries are automatically exited from the system (City of Tshwane, n.d., p. 6; City of Johannesburg, 2018). As discussed earlier, social services can be effective as a poverty alleviation programme only when provision is continuous and sustained. This discussion raises the question of the effectiveness of the programme itself as a sustainable poverty alleviation strategy.

3. Research Method

This study focuses on two metropolitan municipalities in Gauteng: the City of Johannesburg (JHB Metro) and the City of Tshwane (Tshwane Metro). Both municipalities face persistent socio-economic challenges, including high levels of inequality, poverty, and unemployment (Everatt et al., 2023). They were among the first to implement municipal indigent programs, Johannesburg in 2008 and Tshwane in 2003, making them particularly relevant for this research. The study pursues two main objectives: (1) to explore municipal officials' perceptions regarding the design, implementation, evaluation, and monitoring of their municipalities' indigent exit strategies, and (2) to determine how these strategies can serve as interim poverty alleviation measures for employable individuals, particularly unemployed youth and other economically active people.

A non-probability sampling approach was adopted, combining convenience and purposive sampling techniques in both municipalities. Recognizing that not all senior municipal officers possessed in-depth knowledge of the indigent programs, the study focused specifically on officials working within the indigent departments of the respective municipalities. These individuals were deemed most capable of providing detailed and informed insights into the implementation and challenges of the programs.

Participants included senior management officials involved in the indigent programs, such as directors, deputy directors, managers, and social services officers, from both JHB

Metro and Tshwane Metro. Semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary data collection method due to their use of open-ended questions, which allowed flexibility for probing emerging themes and lines of inquiry. The interview questions were developed by the research team in alignment with the study objectives. The qualitative interview guide consisted of 12 questions, four biographical and eight related to the Municipal Indigent Policy. Details of the interview schedule are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Details of participants and interviews

Metro Municipality	Participants and Position	Date of Interview	Length of Interview
JHB Metro	Participant 1, Director	23/05/2022	20 minutes, 41 seconds
	Participant 2, Manager	07/06/2022	13 minutes 42 seconds
	Participant 3, Social Services	30/05/2022	32 minutes 49 seconds
	Participant 4, Deputy Director	25/05/2022	19 minutes 45 seconds
Tshwane Metro	Participant 5, Deputy Director	03/06/2022	25 minutes 21 seconds
	Participant 6, Social Services	06/06/2022	22 minutes 11 seconds
	Participant 7, Deputy Director	29/06/2022	28 minutes 18 seconds
	Participant 8, Social Services	27/05/2022	25 minutes 00 seconds
TOTAL	8 Research Participants	8 Days	

The interviews were conducted and recorded via the Microsoft Teams platform, with the informed consent of all interviewees. Thereafter, the data were analyzed using framework analysis, which provided a comprehensive approach to organizing and interpreting the data. This method facilitated a holistic understanding of the dataset, the identification of key themes, the exploration of relationships between different components, and the synthesis of findings to draw descriptive conclusions based on the extracted themes (Gale et al., 2013).

This article forms part of a broader doctoral study undertaken by the lead author, a registered doctoral candidate at the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT). Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from TUT, and permission to conduct the research was granted by both metropolitan municipalities involved. According to Schneiderman (2021), independent oversight plays a vital role in fostering trustworthy systems through continuous improvement and accountability. In this study, such oversight also ensured credibility in monitoring the graduation of indigent beneficiaries from the register. All interviews were

conducted responsibly, adhering to the ethical principles of honesty, transparency, comprehensiveness, accountability, and openness to public scrutiny.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 State of the Municipal Indigent Policies

The design of the municipal indigent programmes in the two metropolitan municipalities examined in this study, the City of Tshwane (Tshwane Metro) and the City of Johannesburg (JHB Metro), differs notably in their approaches to the provision of basic services.

The Tshwane Metro's indigent programme, while offering its beneficiaries slightly more than the subminimum requirements stipulated by the National Framework for Municipal Indigent Policies (NFMIP), remains largely basic in its structure and household-focused approach. The programme provides each qualifying household with 12 kilolitres of water per month, 100 kWh of electricity per month, refuse removal through a dedicated dustbin, a 100% rebate on property value and refuse removal charges, the writing-off of arrears accumulated at the time of registration, and a free connection for a pre-paid electricity meter (City of Tshwane, 2025).

In contrast, the JHB Metro's indigent programme, referred to as the Expanded Social Package (ESP), goes beyond the standard subminimum package prescribed by the NFMIP. It adopts a context-specific and needs-based model, offering varying levels of assistance to different categories of indigent households (ESP Policy, 2021). This is achieved through a poverty index that assesses applicants based on their poverty level and other socioeconomic factors, allowing the city to prioritize those most in need. The benefits include rebates for water, electricity, sewerage, refuse services, and property rates, structured on a tiered system (City of Johannesburg, 2022).

Additionally, the ESP provides access to food bank benefits for vulnerable groups, including child-headed households, elderly-headed households, youth-headed households, and extremely poor families (ProBono, 2020). According to one municipal official, the ESP is designed to support "indigents and vulnerable groups such as senior citizens, child-headed households, and individuals earning below a certain income threshold."

4.2 Review of the Indigent Exit Strategies

Both Tshwane and Johannesburg metropolitan indigent programmes stipulate that beneficiaries may remain on the indigent register for a limited duration, 24 months for Tshwane Metro and 36 months for JHB Metro's ESP. Once this period lapses, the individual is removed from the register and loses access to benefits, unless a reapplication for an extension is submitted and approved. Upon exiting the register, beneficiaries are expected to begin paying for municipal services.

The NFMIP and the Guidelines for the Implementation of Municipal Indigent Policies (Department of Provincial and Local Government, 2005a) underscore the need for developing indigent exit strategies to enable beneficiaries of free basic services to participate in local economic development (LED) initiatives and achieve self-sufficiency. However, these national frameworks did not provide a specific implementation guide, leaving municipalities to devise their own strategies or align with national poverty alleviation initiatives such as the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET), and other pro-employment schemes.

Feedback from municipal officials in both metros revealed that the absence of a formalized framework for developing indigent exit strategies has hindered effective implementation. Although officials recognized the importance of exit strategies as a complement to indigent support programs, their experiences and perspectives differed. In Tshwane Metro, officials indicated that the objectives of the indigent exit strategy were unclear, resulting in the absence of an ongoing, implementable plan. Similarly, in JHB Metro, one official noted a disconnect between the goals of the indigent exit programme and its actual outcomes, particularly concerning results monitoring and evaluation.

More than a decade after Pillay (2010) highlighted this gap, Tshwane Metro still lacks a comprehensive exit strategy, posing a major setback for poor residents within its jurisdiction. The city currently maintains an indigent database that automatically sends Short Message Service (SMS) notifications at 21 months to alert beneficiaries of the impending lapse of their 24-month benefit period. After expiration, indigents are removed from the register unless they reapply, a process that, according to one official, can take up to six months before benefits are reinstated.

Officials also identified several challenges, including difficulties in verifying information and documentation submitted by applicants due to the absence of robust

verification mechanisms. In a public statement on April 21, 2023, the Member of the Mayoral Committee (MMC) for Community and Social Development Services acknowledged ongoing resident complaints and emphasized the urgent need to review the indigent programme (Mostert, 2023).

Tshwane Metro officials further reported that several empowerment and capacitation initiatives had been launched but later collapsed. One official cited a 2014 partnership with Old Mutual, aimed at providing indigents with financial literacy and entrepreneurial training, which has since been discontinued. Subsequently, the city sought to integrate indigents into the EPWP, temporarily employing them within indigent programme operations.

Officials emphasized the need for interdepartmental collaboration to enhance job creation for indigents. For example, one official noted that in 2014, the infrastructure development sector created temporary employment opportunities for indigents. However, since then, current plans have largely remained “documents that do not bear fruit.” Another official highlighted the lack of prioritization of indigents in the city’s recruitment processes and advocated for affirmative action measures that would reserve certain municipal posts for qualified indigent applicants.

The JHB Metro has made huge strides in the development of its exit strategies, aiming not only to relieve residents from economic shocks but also to reduce poverty and extreme poverty in its communities. The approaches the city has taken are all centered around the empowerment and capacitation of indigents to enable them to generate their own income, as well as the provision of additional context-specific social services. With regard to the empowerment and capacitation of indigents, officials highlighted two approaches focusing on skills development for young indigents and income generation programs for senior citizens. According to one of the officials, the city managed to forge partnerships with NGOs that have been assisting with training and skills development programs for indigents.

The challenges, however, as expressed by one official, were that “*some of the skills development programs offered to the beneficiaries were not accredited and therefore tended to be ineffective since the indigents struggled to use them when seeking employment opportunities after the programs were completed.*” Additionally, the official highlighted a challenge in the skills development programs and the way the selection of indigents for those programs was conducted, as there was no selection criterion for beneficiaries. This, therefore, failed to identify the unique skills and talents of each participant that could be harnessed and

developed. In relation to these challenges, the official mentioned that the municipality was in the process of resolving the hurdle by incorporating more accredited programs in their skills development initiatives, such as geysers installation, bricklaying, plumbing, electricity, and others, and by exposing beneficiaries to projects where they could work directly with partner companies.

The official also suggested the need to involve psychologists or psychotherapists who could apply psychological tests to help identify the intelligence, aptitude, skills, and interests of indigents so that they could be placed in programs where they are most likely to succeed. The city is also actively using social workers in all its regions in empowerment programs for indigents. These social workers conduct economic programs and empowerment workshops in the communities they serve and educate residents about the municipal indigent program.

The idea of working with partner companies was echoed by one official in Tshwane Metro, who highlighted the importance of partnerships, especially with private companies. According to this official, the metro needed to establish relationships with private companies such as cleaning, electrical installation, plumbing, construction, and restaurant companies, among others. These companies would be encouraged to consider those in the indigent database for employment opportunities, and in return, the private companies could be offered incentives such as business tax reductions from the government for choosing to employ indigents.

In what was highlighted as a failed exit process from the program, a participant noted the outcry of some beneficiaries regarding additional benefits such as food and vegetable packs, which are provided free to indigent households. According to the official, exiting beneficiaries from those packages was usually very difficult because, in most cases, entire households depended on them. The participant suggested empowerment programs for such support, where instead of providing food and vegetable packs only, the municipality could ensure wider and longer access through partnerships with the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development. The indigents could then be trained in small-scale vegetable farming for family consumption or small business ventures within their communities. As such, the indigents would learn basic farming skills, including how to grow vegetables in small spaces such as informal settlements and townships. Examples of such small-scale farming include growing vegetables in crates placed on rooftops or creating small community gardens that produce fruits and vegetables to feed community members. According to the official, this

initiative would help reduce the problem of vegetable pack shortages and ensure access to vegetables even after indigents have exited the program.

While the indigent program itself is a social package, one of the key lessons from the interviews was the need to integrate social services into indigent exit programs and not focus solely on income-centric needs. According to the officials, while providing opportunities for indigents to cope with financial pressures in their lives is critical, their social needs also need to be considered even after exiting the indigent register. One highlighted challenge was the assumption that when one family member is empowered with skills and development, that individual will be able to take on the family's financial responsibilities, allowing the family to be released from the indigent program. While it is expected that the empowered family member may help support their family, officials noted that this approach overlooks family life cycle issues, especially among young indigents who still need to start their own families, potentially leaving their original households vulnerable to poverty and extreme poverty.

In another highlighted case, while the metro offers free basic services to the elderly, the program does not specify how it would cater to an elderly person who develops chronic illnesses or requires special care, such as those with dementia, and who may risk being exited from the program after the lapse of a cycle. Additional constraints raised by another official included the struggle under the current indigent assistance, which does not cover the transfer of frail elderly people from retirement villages to old-age homes where they may receive more comprehensive support.

In other context-specific cases where social services were crucial, one interviewee highlighted that the ESP also catered to people who had completed rehabilitation and were recovering drug addicts. The aim was to provide them with training opportunities to further their studies and gain work experience through engagement in various projects. However, the official noted that the department needed to establish a stakeholder relationship with the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) to better manage drug addiction. According to the official, such a partnership was essential as it would teach beneficiaries healthier ways to cope with mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, isolation, lack of parental involvement, dysfunctional social relationships, and poverty (SADAG, 2022a).

As part of other strategies to empower indigents, one official indicated that they could benefit from incorporating elements of leadership and service empowerment, which were being considered in the JHB Metro. The official suggested that this could be achieved by

collaborating with social institutions such as religious centers that encourage indigent people to volunteer in their communities as a form of service to the country. The official stated that “volunteering in this case would serve several purposes, such as: assisting one with identifying their skills and talents that they can turn into income generation opportunities; restoring one’s dignity as a human being because they will be in a position to lend a helping hand in addressing societal problems instead of always operating from the position of a receiver; and exposing them to social institutions that would empower them with healthier ways to mentally face life challenges.”

Based on the feedback from the interviews, it was concluded that Tshwane Metro currently has no exit strategies in place. On the other hand, the JHB Metro indigent exit program is being implemented and has the potential to grow, although challenges remain that need to be addressed. For Tshwane Metro, the absence of indigent exit strategies presents a serious concern, as it may lead to vulnerable populations gradually accumulating and becoming trapped in municipal debt following the loss of free basic services, thereby creating further challenges for the city.

4.3 Challenges with the Indigent Exit Programmes

The indigent exit strategies for the JHB Metro are highly commendable, highlighting a great effort by the municipality in offering free basic services in a sustainable manner, given the state of the South African economy, which is characterized by high levels of inequality, poverty and extreme poverty, and unemployment (Mtaputi & Tinarwo, 2021). Tshwane Metro’s programmes, while they seemed to have been built on a good foundation earlier on, as presented by Pillay (2010), currently reflect a likely failure in the implementation of the programme. According to the Guidelines for the Implementation of Municipal Indigent Policies (Department: Provincial and Local Government, 2005a:33; 2005b:25), indigent exit strategies must accomplish the following main objectives: (1) Poverty eradication through the provision of economic opportunities to the indigents and encouraging a work culture among them; (2) Provide a mechanism for tracking and evaluating indigent households to determine when they should be graduated/removed from the indigent register so that the provision of services remains sustainable; (3) Provide a platform to engage and stimulate a variety of different stakeholders to actively contribute to poverty reduction through the provision of economic opportunities and various other support programmes to help those in need; (4)

Provide a means of linking the beneficiaries to other local, provincial, and national poverty alleviation programmes; and (5) Provide a means to track and evaluate the impact of various strategies on the indigents, and an opportunity for reflection on what is working and what is not.

Johannesburg Metro has made significant strides in addressing objectives 1, 3 and 4. However, based on the feedback from both metropolitan municipalities, objectives 2 and 5 appear to be major grey areas that are either missing or have significant deficiencies in their indigent exit programmes. The key issues identified from the interview feedback highlighted problems with the administration of the programmes, with the following three main areas of concern clearly emerging: a lack of a framework for the implementation of exit strategies; a lack of a proper framework for tracking indigents; and a lack of an M&E system to evaluate the impact of various exit strategies on indigents.

The challenge of a lack of a framework for the implementation of indigent exit strategies might represent a missed opportunity by the national government to guide this crucial poverty reduction initiative. The indigent exit programme could have been a great opportunity to target those truly in need of government assistance, given its potential to reach beneficiaries directly. For instance, according to one official from Tshwane Metro, the indigent exit strategies were not implementable because *“the goals of the exit strategies are not clear, it is not clear how the different departments play a role in exiting indigents who are active members, there is no legislative framework for the program.”* According to the official, *“it is the national framework for municipal indigent policy that says there should be indigent exit strategies,”* and therefore they depend mostly on it, in addition to the local municipal indigent policy, the Municipal Financial Systems Framework, and the Constitution. Another participant highlighted the same problem, noting that *“the goals of the program (indigent exit strategies) were not clear, and hence negatively affecting some implementation efforts.”*

The same issue, a lack of an implementation framework, might explain why indigent programmes for various municipalities around South Africa do not even mention indigent exit strategies in their indigent policies, e.g., the Stellenbosch Municipal Indigent Policy (Stellenbosch Municipality, 2020) and eThekweni Municipality Indigent Policy (City of eThekweni, 2020). For many municipal indigent programmes, the emphasis has been on the conditions for exiting the programme rather than on empowerment.

Both municipalities use a database in which indigents are registered and which is accessible from various offices to track beneficiaries, with records for up to three to four years for Johannesburg Metro and records from 2017 for Tshwane Metro. For the City of Tshwane, the system flags those due for exit, sending an SMS to the beneficiary in the 21st month, followed by a visit by city officials to households due for exit to evaluate and prepare them for exit or recommend reapplication. For JHB Metro, tracking and evaluation are generally performed when indigents come to re-register for an extension of benefits every six months. Both municipalities make extensive use of social workers in their programmes, who conduct home visits and provide important tracking information. However, it was also noted that challenges arise with elderly indigents who may not be able to come to the offices to register or re-register in the programme. In another related challenge, a Tshwane official highlighted cases where the registered indigent person had died, but the families did not notify the indigent programme authorities for fear of losing the benefits of the deceased registered indigent relative.

While the two metros seem to have some form of tracking process for indigents, the evaluation process has several shortcomings. For starters, the municipalities pointed out the lack of mechanisms to verify the information presented by applicants, especially those applying for benefits while working or otherwise undeserving of such benefits. According to the municipalities, this could be addressed through the integration of different systems to verify submitted information. However, according to one official, their departments did not have links with the Department of Home Affairs, the South African Revenue Service (SARS), and the Department of Labour, which made this process very difficult. The official added that the main inhibiting factor for such integration was the funding needed to facilitate such an initiative.

One official also noted that there was no integration of municipal indigent programmes with other social services, e.g., child support grants or disability grants. According to the official, such integration would help in assessing the needs of a household and in tracking the progress of indigents. Therefore, at present, some undeserving people benefit from free basic services intended for indigents, either because the indigent has died, started working and is no longer eligible, or through fraudulent applications, resulting in a waste of resources meant for the poor and extremely poor citizens.

The main challenge both Johannesburg and Tshwane municipalities face is in monitoring and evaluating (M&E) the impact of their indigent exit programmes. While both

municipalities have overarching M&E frameworks within their Social Development Departments, these are not specifically focused on assessing the effectiveness of indigent exit strategies. Feedback from municipal officials revealed that M&E is currently used to verify whether indigents receive their free basic services and whether they should reapply for benefits or exit the programme. However, impact assessments of the exit strategies themselves are lacking. Of the eight participants, only four addressed the question of evaluating the impact of the exit strategies on indigents. A Johannesburg Metro official responsible for M&E explained that the goals of the indigent exit programmes are not clearly defined, making it difficult to apply standard M&E principles such as the results chain. There is a misalignment between the goals of the exit programmes and the outcomes of the activities aimed at achieving them, complicating effective M&E. Similarly, a Tshwane Metro M&E specialist highlighted the absence of a legislative framework governing the M&E of indigent exit strategies. Without clear guidelines or legal backing, it becomes challenging to effectively track and assess the success of these programmes.

While both municipalities perform some level of M&E for their indigent programmes, the focus is not on the impact of exit strategies. There is a need for better alignment between programme goals and outcomes, as well as a legislative framework to guide effective M&E, particularly for the evaluation of indigent exit programmes.

5. Conclusion

Poverty is complex and requires a range of coordinated strategies for its eradication. Economic growth is regarded as a long-term driver of poverty reduction but needs to be supplemented by short-term interventions such as food stamps, subsidized housing, and income support to help the poor and vulnerable improve their socio-economic conditions (Bloek et al., 2019; Mokomane, 2012). Combating poverty also requires addressing inequality, promoting economic growth, and providing essential social services alongside financial and social safety nets (Singh & Chudasama, 2020). In South Africa, municipal indigent programs play a crucial role in poverty reduction by offering basic services to the poor. However, these programs need to be paired with indigent exit strategies to foster long-term independence, as basic service packages alone are insufficient to meet indigents' broader needs. Municipalities must find innovative ways to empower indigents and develop comprehensive frameworks for implementing and monitoring exit strategies.

Findings from Johannesburg and Tshwane Metros indicate efforts to implement indigent exit strategies but highlight the lack of proper monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems. Without M&E, municipalities cannot assess which strategies are effective, which hampers decision-making on poverty interventions. Participants emphasized the need for a separate M&E framework dedicated to indigent exit strategies, which would help ensure effective resource allocation and guide the development of successful exit programs.

Challenges in tracking and monitoring indigent programs are significant due to the human capital demands of these tasks. Additionally, the lack of records on successful outcomes further complicates program assessment. Fraud is also a concern, as illustrated by a Tshwane Metro official who reported that 28,000 people were removed from the register for illegally benefiting from the indigent program.

In conclusion, while municipal indigent programs are essential, their success depends heavily on effective M&E. Without it, municipalities struggle to track progress, address challenges, and ensure that the programs benefit those in genuine need.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was not supported by any funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by Tshwane university of Technology. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relative clearance(s) by the City of Tshwane and City of Johannesburg.

ORCID

Joyce T Ringane – <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-8330-5954>

References

- Aguilar, S. J., Rosenberg, J. M., Greenhalgh, S. P., Fütterer, T., Lishinski, A., & Fischer, C. (2021). A different experience in a different moment? Teachers' social media use before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. *SAGE Open*, *11*(2), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584211063898>
- Betz, J. (2022). Poverty. In *Development policy* (pp. xx–xx). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-35011-6_5
- Bhorat, H., & van der Westhuizen, C. (2012, November). *Poverty, inequality and the nature of economic growth in South Africa* (Working Paper 12/151). Development Policy Research Unit, University of Cape Town. <http://hdl.handle.net/11427/7294>
- Bloeck, M. C., Galiani, S., & Weinschelbaum, F. (2019). Poverty alleviation strategies under informality: Evidence for Latin America. *Latin American Economic Review*, *28*(1), Article 14, 1–40. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40503-019-0074-4>
- City of eThekweni. (2020). *eThekweni Municipality indigent policy*. http://www.durban.gov.za/City_Government/Administration/Administrative%20Clusters/treasury/Revenue_Services/Documents/FinalIndigentPolicy_2020_2021.pdf
- City of Johannesburg Services. (n.d.). *Expanded Social Package rebates*. <https://www.joburg.org.za/services/Pages/City%20Services/Rebates/Expanded-Social-Package-Rebates.aspx>
- City of Johannesburg. (2008). *City of Johannesburg's Expanded Social Package policy and strategy*. https://www.joburg.org.za/departments_/Documents/Social%20Assistance/expanded_social_package_policy.pdf
- City of Tshwane. (2025). *City of Tshwane indigent programme as part of poverty alleviation*. <http://www.tshwane.gov.za/sites/Departments/Health-Department/Publications/Indigent%20Programme%20Brochure.pdf>
- Cowling, N. (2023). Number of people living in extreme poverty in South Africa 2016–2025. *Statista*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1263290/number-of-people-living-in-extreme-poverty-in-south-africa/>
- Department: Provincial and Local Government. (2005a). *National framework for municipal indigent policies*.
- Department: Provincial and Local Government. (2005b). *Guidelines for the implementation of municipal indigent policies*.
- Everatt, D., Lynge, H., & Abrahams, C. (2023). *Neighbourhood characteristics and inequality in the City of Johannesburg: A preliminary analysis*. Centre for Sustainable, Healthy and Learning Cities and Neighbourhoods.
- Funnel, S. C., & Rogers, P. J. (2011). *Purposeful program theory: Effective use of theories of change and logic models*. Jossey-Bass.
- Fuo, O. N. (2014). *Local government's role in the pursuit of the transformative constitutional mandate of social justice in South Africa* (Doctoral dissertation). North-West University, South Africa.
- Gale, N. K., Heath, G., Cameron, E., Rashid, S., & Redwood, S. (2013). Using the framework method for the analysis of qualitative data in multidisciplinary health research. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, *13*(1), Article 117. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-13-117>

- Hall, K., & Sambu, W. (2018). Income poverty, unemployment and social grants. In *Children's Institute: The Numbers (South African Child Gauge 2018 chapter)*. Children's Institute, University of Cape Town. <https://www.ci.ac.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files>
- Jones, E. (2015). Programme theory – What is it and how will it help me to improve patient care? <https://staffblogs.le.ac.uk/sapphire/2015/09/04/programme-theory/>
- Leburu, M. C. (2017). *An analysis of the implementation of the indigent policy by the city of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality* (Master's thesis). University of Pretoria, South Africa.
- Maden, M., Cunliffe, A., McMahon, N., Booth, A., Carey, G. M., Paisley, S., Dickson, R., & Gabbay, M. (2017). Use of programme theory to understand the differential effects of interventions across socio-economic groups in systematic reviews — A systematic methodology review. *Systematic Reviews*, 6, Article 266, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-017-0638-9>
- Mangole, T. C., Tapala, E. N., Ngejane, H. C., Nair, K. K., & Rampine, T. E. L. (2018). Implementation of a public service delivery platform to improve the service delivery of indigent registers in South African municipalities. Paper presented at the International Conference on Advances in Big Data, Computing and Data Communication Systems (icABCD 2018), Durban, South Africa. <http://hdl.handle.net/10204/10520>
- Mashaba, N., & Saurombe, M. D. (2023). Evaluating the effectiveness of a social grant regulating framework in South Africa. *Acta Commercii*, 23(1), Article a1011, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ac.v23i1.1011>
- Mashego, T. R. (2015). *Evaluation of the level of community participation in the implementation of the indigent exit strategy as a poverty alleviation measure in the City of Tshwane* (Unpublished master's dissertation). University of South Africa. <https://hdl.handle.net/10500/19611>
- Mokomane, Z. (2012). *Types of good practices focusing on family poverty reduction and social exclusion*. Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa. <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/docs/egm12/PAPER-MOKOMANETYPESOFPOLICIES.pdf>
- Mostert, A. (2023, April 21). Indigent programme policy under review to address resident concerns. City of Tshwane. <https://www.tshwane.gov.za/?m=20230421>
- Mtapuri, O., & Tinarwo, P. (2021). From apartheid to democracy: Patterns and trends of inequality in South Africa. *Southern African Journal of Demography*, 21(1), 104–133. <https://doi.org/10.2307/27125725>
- Onyeaka, H., Anumudu, C. K., Al Sharify, Z. T., Egele Godswill, E., & Mbaegbu, P. (2021). COVID-19 pandemic: A review of the global lockdown and its far-reaching effects. *Science Progress*, 104(2), Article 368504211019854. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00368504211019854>
- Pillay, U. (2010). *Indigent exit strategy of the City of Tshwane*. Human Sciences Research Council. <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11910/4160>
- Pope, A. M., Finney, S. J., & Bare, A. K. (2019). The essential role of programme theory: Fostering theory-driven practice and high-quality outcomes assessment in student affairs. *Research & Practice in Assessment*, 14, 5–17.
- Potts, R. (2011). Social welfare in South Africa: Curing or causing poverty? *Penn State Journal of International Affairs*, 2(1), 74–92.

- Probono. (2020). *City of Johannesburg's Expanded Social Packages*. <https://probono.org.za/city-of-johannesburgs-expanded-social-packages/>
- Ramnath, L. (2015). *The effectiveness of poverty reduction strategy in post-apartheid South Africa* (Master of Commerce in Economic Dissertation). University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Ruiters, G. (2016). The moving line between state benevolence and control: Municipal indigent programmes in South Africa. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 53(2), 169-186. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909616667522>
- Schneiderman, B. (2021, August). Industry: Trustworthy certification by independent oversight. In *Responsible AI: Bridging from ethics to practice*. Communications of the ACM.
- Schoch, M., & Lakner, C. (2020). The number of poor people continues to rise in Sub-Saharan Africa, despite a slow decline in the poverty rate. *World Bank*.
- Seekings, J., & Natrass, N. (2011). State-business relations and pro-poor growth in South Africa. *Journal of International Development*, 23(3), 365-382. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.1774>
- Sharpe, G. (2011). A review of program theory and theory-based evaluations. *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, 1(3).
- Singh, P. K., & Chudasama, H. (2020). Evaluating poverty alleviation strategies in a developing country. *PLoS ONE*, 15(1), e0227176. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0227176>
- South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG). (2022).
- Statistics South Africa. (2017). *Poverty trends in South Africa: An examination of absolute poverty between 2006 & 2015*. www.statssa.gov.za/?p=10341
- Stellenbosch Municipality. (2020). *Indigent policy (Appendix 7 – Indigent Policy 2020–2021)*. Stellenbosch.gov.za
- Tissington, K. (2013). *Targeting the poor? An analysis of free basic services (FBS) and municipal indigent policies in South Africa*. Socio-Economic Rights Research Outputs, 1-74.
- United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. (2019). *International Day for the Eradication of Poverty 17 October*. [https://www.uneca.org.archive/stories/international-day-eradication-poverty-17-october](https://www.uneca.org/archive/stories/international-day-eradication-poverty-17-october)
- Van Belle, B., Marchal, B., Dubourg, D., & Kegels, G. (2010). How to develop a theory-driven evaluation design? Lessons learned from an adolescent sexual and reproductive health programme in West Africa. *BMC Public Health*, 10, 741. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-10-741>
- World Bank. (2015). *Global economic prospects: Having fiscal space and using it*. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/GEP/GEP2015a/pdfs/GEP15a_web_full.pdf
- World Health Organization. (2020). *The state of food security and nutrition in the world 2020*.