Evaluating the national framework for municipal indigent policies using the 5E policy analysis approach

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Abstract

In 2003, South Africa introduced the National Framework for Municipal Indigent Policies (NFMIP) to alleviate poverty by 2012, but it has failed to meet targets due to implementation challenges, fiscal constraints, and capacity gaps. The primary aim of this study is to evaluate the NFMIP by applying the 5E Policy Analysis approach, thereby assessing its effectiveness, efficiency, ethical considerations, equity, and fairness, and establishing actionable recommendations for improvement. The study adopted a qualitative, interpretivist multiple case study approach across three municipalities: metropolitan, district, and local. Purposive sampling was employed, with in-depth interviews conducted among 21 appointed and elected officials and community members from the selected municipalities. Data was analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phased approach by Braun and Clarke (2006). Findings indicate that the NFMIP, in its current form, fails to meet the five essential criteria of policy analysis and is therefore not fit for purpose. This study recommends involving social workers in policy design, implementation, and evaluation; actively engaging community stakeholders; integrating technology for greater efficiency; adopting a targeted, multi-factor approach to indigency; and strengthening policy implementation mechanisms. This study contributes to public policy and administration by employing the 5E Policy Framework to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the NFMIP, thereby facilitating an understanding of policy performance in different municipal categories and informing the development of more effective, efficient, equitable, and ethical practices for serving indigent populations.

Suggested Citation:
Shayamano, M. & Kuhlengisa, I.R. (2026). Evaluating the national framework for municipal indigent policies using the 5E policy analysis approach. *International Review of Social Sciences Research*, 6(1), 107-133. https://doi.org/10.53378/irssr.353307

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1. Introduction

The triple challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequalities continue to haunt South Africa despite the existence of several policy frameworks aimed at addressing them. Ever since the dawn of democracy, the Government has made great strides in introducing policies aimed at addressing such challenges, and these are inclusive of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which was an integrated and sustainable programme, a people-driven process, ensuring peace and security for all, nation building and democratisation of South Africa. According to the RDP (1994), one of the critical programmes was meeting basic needs such as housing, potable water, electricity, and a clean and healthy environment. When the RDP did not deliver on its mandate, the government introduced the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy (GEAR) (Mosala et al., 2017). The GEAR strategy was followed by the Urban Renewal Programme (URP), which was aimed at accelerating urban renewal, minimising poverty levels and unemployment and implementing access to free basic services (FBS) (water, sanitation and electricity). The URP was introduced in 2001 and laid the foundation for developing urban poor communities (Mhlekude, 2013). At the time the URP was introduced, only 24% of the households in South Africa had a stable water supply, only 30% had access to electricity, and 49% were using improved sanitation facilities (Statistics South Africa [StatsSA], 2013).

The GEAR and URP failed to adequately address the root causes of poverty and inequality in South Africa, with GEAR falling short of its economic growth and job creation targets. At the same time, the URP often resulted in the displacement of poor communities and gentrification rather than sustainable urban development. This resulted in the introduction of the National Framework for Municipal Indigent Policies (NFMIP) in South Africa, which aims to guide municipalities in providing free basic services such as potable water, sanitation, refuse collection, and electricity to impoverished people to alleviate poverty (Kuhlengisa, 2024).

The NFMIP is a guiding document issued by the South African government to assist municipalities in formulating and implementing their indigent policies (Khoza & Mukhonza, 2024). The primary objectives of the policy are to alleviate poverty (Fuo, 2020) and enhance access to basic services (NFMIP, 2003). Ngarava (2023) notes that the NFMIP determines how municipalities provide subsidies to indigent households within their jurisdiction. The framework outlines key elements, including the definition of indigents, service standards to be provided, selection criteria, verification processes, and funding models. These benchmarks

ensure that indigent households are not excluded from accessing essential services. According to the NFMIP (2003), the policy establishes a social safety net to guarantee that all individuals can access basic services.

Leburu (2017) emphasizes that indigent individuals share a common need: access to affordable basic services, which is essential for productive and healthy engagement in society. Consequently, the NFMIP serves as a benchmark for achieving this goal within the local government sphere. The policy mandates that municipalities develop and implement indigent policies tailored to their specific contexts, focusing on providing free basic services (FBS) to poor households. It also provides guidance on financing indigent programs, determining service levels, targeting beneficiaries, and establishing qualification criteria. Ngarava (2023) identifies four core services provided under the NFMIP: potable water, sanitation, refuse collection, and basic energy. The framework specifies that municipalities should supply 25 litres of potable water per person per day for at least 350 days per year (NFMIP, 2003). In terms of electricity, households are entitled to 50 kWh per month, sufficient for lighting and heating needs (Leburu, 2017). Additionally, municipalities are required to collect refuse weekly to protect community health (NFMIP, 2003).

The NFMIP also provides guidelines to ensure that municipalities develop indigent policies that are effective, efficient, and ethically sound while ensuring FBS reach impoverished populations (Fuo, 2020). Despite this, access to basic services among indigent households has declined. According to Statistics South Africa (StatsSA, 2020), as of 30 June 2020, there were 3,580,006 registered indigent households in South Africa. In the Eastern Cape province, the number of indigent households increased from 584,670 to 601,602 during the same period. However, the provision of free basic services decreased: the number of households receiving free potable water fell from 345,213 to 279,824, those benefiting from electricity through indigent support dropped from 329,912 to 292,046, and access to solid waste management services declined from 234,375 to 193,874.

It is against this backdrop that the present study aims to evaluate the NFMIP using the 5-Es framework: effectiveness, efficiency, ethical consideration, equity, and establishment of recommendations for positive change. To achieve this aim, the study examined how the NFMIP has been implemented in three municipalities in the Eastern Cape province: Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality (BCMM), Amathole District Municipality (ADM), and Ngqushwa Local Municipality (NLM). These municipalities differ in size, socio-economic

status, and functionality. BCMM, a metropolitan municipality, is urban and financially viable, with a revenue collection rate of approximately 80%, enabling it to meet its monthly obligations (BCMM Annual Report, 2022). In contrast, ADM is peri-urban and was placed under administration under Section 139 of the Constitution (1996) due to financial difficulties (ADM Annual Report, 2021). NLM, a rural municipality, is financially non-viable, with low revenue collection (Ngqushwa Annual Report, 2020). The selection of these three municipalities is based on their representativeness of other South African municipalities. BCMM exemplifies metropolitan municipalities in urban cities with extensive resources to implement policies. ADM, as a district municipality, represents municipalities that span both urban and rural areas. NLM represents rural municipalities, reflecting the unique challenges faced in rural settings. This study is particularly important as the NFMIP impacts indigent populations differently across urban and rural areas.

The NFMIP provides the foundation for the provision of FBS to indigents, aiming to improve their quality of life by enhancing access to essential services and meeting basic human needs. The term "indigent" refers to individuals lacking the necessities of life and living below the poverty line, who are unable to pay for municipal services (Shikwambane, 2017; Pillay, 2021). Kuhlengisa (2024) asserts that the NFMIP represents a strategic effort to address socio-economic disparities by ensuring that indigent households have access to adequate basic services such as potable water, electricity, sanitation, and refuse collection. Despite these intentions, the effectiveness of the NFMIP in achieving its objectives remains a critical area of inquiry. Indigents in the selected municipalities often receive insufficient access to FBS, exacerbating their vulnerability and poverty levels (ADM Annual Report, 2023; BCMM Annual Report, 2022; NLM Annual Report, 2023). Additionally, many eligible individuals remain unregistered and cannot access the benefits designed for them, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalisation (Fuo, 2020).

The failure of municipalities to manage indigent accounts effectively has led to the accumulation of unmanageable debt among indigent households due to unpaid bills. This situation adds stress and hardship, making it even more difficult for these households to escape poverty. Therefore, this study sought to evaluate the NFMIP using the 5-Es policy analysis approach, focusing on how effectively, efficiently, and ethically the framework serves indigent populations, while also identifying areas for equity improvement and actionable recommendations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by the 5E policy analysis framework, as articulated by Parron et al. (1986) in Basic Methods of Policy Analysis and Planning. The rationale for utilising the 5E policy analysis framework, rather than alternative frameworks, is grounded in its capacity to extend beyond outcomes and costs to incorporate normative and distributive considerations. This makes it well suited to an interpretivist, qualitative case study design that seeks to explore the "how" and "why" of policy implementation.

The framework proposes that public policy should be analysed based on effectiveness, efficiency, ethical considerations, equity, and the establishment of actionable recommendations (Patton et al., 1986). It is important to note that the 5E policy analysis framework is not attributed to a single individual; rather, it is a widely used framework in public policy analysis that incorporates five key elements (Weimer & Vining, 2010). Iqbal et al. (2018) argue that this framework provides a structured approach for analysing public policies and assessing their potential impacts and implications.

The principles of the 5E policy analysis framework consist of effectiveness, efficiency, ethical considerations, equity, and the establishment of actionable recommendations.

Effectiveness. This principle assesses how well a policy works, or is predicted to work, in addressing the targeted problem. It examines whether the policy achieves its intended goals and objectives. Policies must therefore be analysed based on their effectiveness in meeting their intended targets (Iqbal et al., 2018; Kirst-Ashman, 2016). In the context of this study, the effectiveness of the NFMIP was measured against its ability to provide indigents with free basic services and to enable their participation as equal partners in matters that affect them.

Efficiency. This principle evaluates the resources required to implement a policy, including costs and effort (Parron et al., 1986). It considers whether the benefits of the policy justify the associated costs and whether it represents the most efficient approach to addressing the issue. In line with this principle, the study assesses whether the NFMIP financing mechanisms promote efficiency and whether municipalities implement their indigent policies in a cost-effective manner.

Ethical considerations. The principle of ethical considerations examines the moral and ethical implications of a policy (Iqbal et al., 2018; Kirst-Ashman, 2016). This includes assessing whether the policy is ethically sound and identifying potential unintended

consequences (Weimer & Vining, 2010). In this study, the NFMIP is assessed based on its respect for indigents' rights to dignity and confidentiality, as democratic rights and opportunities are core dimensions of human needs. Max-Neef et al. (1991) identify participation as one of the nine axiological needs, while Doyal and Gough (1991) argue that political participation is a precondition for the satisfaction of human needs. Additionally, under ethical considerations, the NFMIP is evaluated based on its ability to reduce inequality gaps and ensure the provision of adequate basic services.

Equity and fairness. Public policy should be assessed against the principles of equity and fairness, which aim to distribute benefits and burdens fairly among citizens. Sumra (2019) argues that individuals have different needs and circumstances that may require unequal treatment to achieve fairness within society. In line with this perspective, the NFMIP in this study is assessed based on indigents' circumstances to ensure fair and equitable outcomes.

Establishment of recommendations for positive change. This principle focuses on developing actionable recommendations derived from the policy analysis (Patton et al., 1986). It involves determining whether a policy should be amended, replaced, removed, or expanded to improve its effectiveness and relevance.

Table 1

Definitions of the 5Es

Principles	Definition
Effectiveness	The degree to which a public policy achieves its intended outcomes and meets its goals
Efficiency	Refers to the optimal utilisation of resources to achieve the desired policy outcomes with minimal wastage or costs.
Ethical Consideration	The alignment of a public policy with moral principles and societal values
Equity and Fairness	This entails just treatment and distribution of resources among all citizens.
Establishment of recommendations	Provision of actionable advice to decision-makers based on research findings, analysis and stakeholder inputs

Source: Researchers own Construction, 2024

The 5E policy analysis framework provides a structured approach for analysing the NFMIP from multiple perspectives, ensuring a comprehensive evaluation. This approach

assists policymakers in making informed decisions regarding the implementation, modification, or termination of the NFMIP based on a thorough assessment of the five key principles. While the researchers acknowledge that this framework allows for a multidimensional evaluation of the NFMIP, its main limitation lies in its tendency to overlook the multiple and interconnected factors that influence policy decisions, such as political dynamics, social contexts, and economic conditions. This limited consideration of the broader policy environment may result in incomplete analyses and recommendations. Table 1 provides a brief definition of the five Es.

2.2. Public Policy Practices

Policy evaluation plays a pertinent role in determining the impact of the NFMIP in South Africa. By systematically assessing the 5E dimensions, policy evaluation contributes to better governance, informed decision-making, and, ultimately, improved outcomes for citizens. Mukherjee and Bali (2019) argue that if public policies are aimed at problem-solving, policy design should aim at the development of policy solutions in a deliberate manner that accomplishes that purpose. Therefore, this entails developing effective policies requiring designers and those involved in policy implementation to have the requisite skill sets and competencies. Howlett et al. (2018), Wu et al. (2017) and Peters et al. (2018) have highlighted that the essential condition for policy success rests on the interplay of analytical, managerial, and political capacities on the part of individual policy actors, regulatory organisations, and the general policy system.

It can be noted that various elements play a role towards policy effectiveness. For instance, in evaluating policy effectiveness, there is a need to match policy goals to existing policy means. In addition, there is a need for managerial abilities that marshal state resources towards policy priorities and political endowments, allowing policymakers and administrators to coordinate, create, and implement their policy plans. However, having the requisite skills and competencies of policy designers and implementers is not enough to ensure policy effectiveness; there is a need for policy clarity where the aims of the objectives are clearly spelt out (Hudson et al., 2018). Abdullahi and Othman (2020) argue that for a policy to be effective, its objectives must be apparent to those responsible for implementing it. This, therefore, entails that the effectiveness of any policy depends on the competencies of those tasked to implement it, political willingness and the clarity of the policy.

Efficiency is another area to be considered when evaluating public policy, which involves using resources to achieve desired policy outcomes and maximise societal benefits (Zhou & Utete, 2023). Mergoni and De Wittea (2021) posit that policy efficiency entails how well government actions and programs accomplish their goals whilst minimising costs and unintended negative consequences. This focuses more on achieving policy targets by utilising fewer resources when evaluating policy efficiency. Policy efficiency depends heavily on policy inputs and outputs; the context of the policy determines whether the most efficient or the most effective policy is preferred. In achieving efficiency in public policies, there is a need to streamline the process, taking into cognisance administrative efficiency and coordination (Manzoor, 2014). Delis et al. (2023) argue that to ensure efficiency in policy implementation, there is a need to minimise bureaucratic overheads, simplify the procedures, and ensure smooth collaboration between government agencies and stakeholders. The lack of collaboration and positive partnership negatively impacts the effectiveness of policy implementation (Shayamano, 2025), thus resulting in poor outcomes.

Pillay and Mutereko (2022) state that policy efficiency in most countries in the global South is negatively affected by inadequate administrative systems and a lack of cohesive data management. Charbonneau et al. (2025) highlights that the government's failure to streamline administration processes has negatively affected the efficient implementation of public policies. However, efficiency does not only relate to the administrative aspects of the policy but also to the adaptability and sustainability of the policy. Efficient policies must adapt to changing circumstances and remain effective over time. Flexibility and long-term viability must be considered as they entail the policy's ability to adjust as new information or challenges arise and ensure the policy benefits are sustained without excessive ongoing costs. Through the conceptualisation of public policy efficiency, municipalities can work together to create and implement policies that deliver the greatest possible value to society while responsibly using public resources.

Public policies should be evaluated through the lens of ethics, examining their ability to respect the rights to dignity and confidentiality of the people they intend to serve. Andrzej (2015) argues that ethical consideration is vital in assessing the consciously or subconsciously good and evil, positive and negative actions, justice and injustice of a public policy. To achieve some of the ethical considerations, there is a need for a democratic dialogue where the people affected by the policy actively partake in decision-making since democratic rights and

opportunities are a core dimension of human needs (Hermans & Cunningham, 2013). Max-Neef et al. (1991) identified participation as one of the nine 'axiological' needs. On the other hand, Doyal and Gough (1991) postulate that political participation is a precondition for satisfaction with needs. Similarly, Khotami (2017) indicates that accountability mechanisms are vital ethical considerations in public policy because they foster officials and institutions to act responsibly, transparently and in the public's best interest. Public policies should ensure that there is open government whilst protecting sensitive information. In addition, accountability mechanisms should be implemented without hindering effective government and ensuring that the oversight process remains free from political influence.

Equity and fairness are vital in public policy as they entail different treatment of people to provide equity and justice (Johnson & Svara, 2015). To deal with the social and economic inequalities in most Global South countries, the most vulnerable members of society must benefit, and to equalise resource distribution, people must be treated differently (Johnson & Svara, 2015; Sumra, 2019). Hence, it should be noted that the government should make deliberate efforts to ensure positive discrimination to allow public policies to benefit the vulnerable members of the communities. Within the public policy space, indigents must have equal access to opportunities, rights, resources and raising voices. The government should streamline the process that discriminates against vulnerable persons from effectively benefiting from the policy (Fuo, 2021; Kuhlengisa, 2022; Pillay & Muteroko, 2022).

Existing studies primarily highlight variations in policy adoption by municipal category and persistent challenges in delivering free basic services such as water, electricity, and waste management. However, no prior research has systematically applied the 5E policy analysis framework to evaluate the NFMIP across different municipal categories, leaving a critical gap in understanding its municipal-level outcomes for indigent households. In addition, prior studies on municipal indigent policies have identified prevalent barriers, including inadequate budget allocations and inefficient management of the indigent registers. Therefore, if the NFMIP were functioning optimally, one would expect improved service delivery and equitable access to basic services for indigent households. However, the data from this study indicate persistent gaps, including weak knowledge management and political interference that hinder the realisation of these expected outcomes.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach, Design and Paradigm

This study adopted a qualitative research approach and an interpretive paradigm, reflecting that ontology must be relativist, epistemology must be subjective, and methodology must be naturalistic (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). The qualitative research approach was adopted in this study to enable an in-depth exploration of the national framework for municipal indigent policies using the 5E policy analysis approach. Additionally, this study was underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm, which fits well with this study because it emphasises understanding policy phenomena through the subjective meanings and experiences of municipal actors, such as officials and indigent households, rather than seeking universal truth.

Furthermore, a multiple case study design was utilised in this study with Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, Amathole District Municipality and Ngqushwa Local Municipality as cases. This design provides a holistic, multi-faceted analysis of the framework within its natural municipal context, ideal for examining "how" and "why" questions about policy evaluation without experimental control. Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality is a category A municipality with a revenue collection success rate of approximately 80%, which implies that it is financially viable and able to meet its monthly obligations. In contrast, the Amathole District Municipality is a category C municipality currently under administration in terms of Section 139 of the Constitution, which empowers the provincial executive to intervene in a municipality if a municipality cannot or does not fulfil an obligation in terms of the Constitution or legislation to approve a budget or any revenue-raising measures necessary to give effect to the budget. Ngqushwa Local Municipality is a Category B municipality located in a rural area, which is not financially viable and has a low revenue collection rate, entailing its struggles to execute its day-to-day constitutional duties (Ngqushwa Annual Report, 2020).

3.2. Participants of the Study

The sample size for this study was 21 participants, based on the nature and scope of the study, data saturation, and participants' availability. Various scholars argue that a sample of 12 to 50 participants is acceptable in a qualitative study (Vasileiou et al., 2018; Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The participants included two elected officials from each municipality, two senior managers from each municipality and three general employees from each municipality

responsible for the day-to-day implementation of the participants. The rationale for the selection of these participants is that elected officials are responsible for approving policies with the municipality, senior managers are responsible for policy development, and general employees are responsible for the day-to-day implementation of the policy. Purposive sampling was employed to select 21 participants from the selected municipalities. This sampling technique was used to deliberately target individuals with extensive experience in indigent policy implementation, enabling the collection of in-depth, contextual insights into the NFMIP.

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of participants

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Number of years employed within the municipality	Type of municipality	Level of education
ADMP 1	Female	42	13	District	Degree
ADMP2	Female	48	8	District	Diploma
ADMP3	Male	54	16	District	Degree
ADMP4	Female	44	10	District	Matric
ADMP5	Male	37	6	District	Master's
ADMP6	Female	47	21	District	Matric
ADMP7	Male	40	12	District	Degree
BCMMP1	Male	59	33	Metro	Diploma
BCMMP2	Male	34	10	Metro	Degree
BCMMP3	Female	53	8	Metro	Matric
BCMMP4	Female	47	10	Metro	Degree
BCMMP5	Female	40	18	Metro	Postgraduate
BCMMP6	Female	39	11	Metro	Degree
BCMMP7	Male	43	7	Metro	Diploma
NLMP1	Female	41	11	Local Municipality	Postgraduate Diploma
NLMP2	Male	42	12	Local Municipality	Degree
NLMP3	Male	53	6	Local municipality	Master's
NLMP4	Male	49	10	Local Municipality	BTech
NLMP5	Female	56	13	Local Municipality	Degree
NLMP6	Female	36	8	Local municipality	
NLMP7	Male	51	14	Local Municipality	Matric

From the demographic profile presented in Table 1, it can be deduced that 52% of the participants were women, ensuring gender balance for inclusive, equitable findings reflective of municipal diversity. The average age of the participants was 45 years. All the participants had over five years' tenure (range: 6-33 years), providing deep institutional knowledge of policy evolution, stakeholder relationships, and implementation challenges. Most held tertiary qualifications (degrees predominant, with three postgraduates), fostering analytical skills essential for nuanced indigent policy insights, while experienced matric holders contributed practical perspectives.

3.3. Instrumentation and Data Gathering Process

In terms of data collection, an in-depth interview guide was used as a data collection tool, with questions aligned to the research objectives. The researchers conducted a pilot study before the actual data collection process totest the interview protocol, refine it, and ensure methodological rigour. The interview sessions were 45-60 minutes long, a recorder was used to record the sessions, and prior consent to record the interviews was sought from all the study participants.

3.4. Data Analysis

The collected data was analysed using deductive thematic analysis where data presentation is guided by the 5E policy analysis framework. This process was guided by the six-phased approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2022): familiarisation with collected information, data coding, generation of initial themes, development and reviewing of themes, theme refinement and naming, and lastly, producing the write up. The interview recordings were transcribed during the data analysis process, and researchers continuously reread the transcripts to familiarise themselves with the gathered data. Important notes were then jotted down, and data was organised into meaningful groups. A thematic table was also generated to ensure that each developed theme had sufficient data. The themes were then refined and discussed. The participants are cited verbatim in the data presentation below, and their views are labelled using their municipal affiliation instead of their names or positions to ensure their privacy.

To ensure trustworthiness of this study, the researchers used the four criteria by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Transferability was ensured through thick descriptions of municipal contexts, poverty dimensions, service delivery, capacities, emergent themes with verbatim quotes, and detailed methodology, enabling replication in similar settings. Dependability and confirmability were achieved through a chronological audit trail documenting research decisions, while credibility employed triangulation, peer debriefing for bias reduction, member-checking, and researcher reflexivity acknowledging public service background influences.

3.5. Research Ethics

This study involved human participants; as such, it was critical to follow ethical procedures to protect the participants from harm. First and foremost, the researchers sought ethical clearance from the University of Pretoria before commencing the data collection process. Permission to conduct the study with the participants was sought from the relevant organisations. During the data collection process, the researcher ensured that the participants had sufficient information about the study before they consented. The participants were given participant information sheets, which explained the purpose of the study and were also given a consent form to sign after agreeing to participate in the study. Confidentiality was also upheld in this study by not disclosing the names and identifying any information about the participants during data analysis and presentation processes.

4. Findings

Data drawn from in-depth interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, and the findings that emerged are discussed according to themes.

Theme 1: Effectiveness

Effectiveness measures whether the policy successfully achieves its intended outcomes and addresses the identified problem. In determining the effectiveness of the NFMIP, participants were asked how the framework has achieved its targets of ensuring that no one is left behind in accessing basic services and what challenges have affected the effectiveness of this framework. This study revealed that implementing the national framework has not been effective in the selected municipalities as it has failed to alleviate poverty, and a significant number of eligible indigents still have no access to free basic services. This ineffectiveness emanates from limited financial resources, lack of capacity, and lack of clarity.

"As a rural municipality, limited financial resources hinder the effective execution of the NFMIP. Budget constraints prevent us from consistently delivering the services outlined in the framework. While the policy mandates the municipality to provide free basic services in the form of potable water, electricity, sanitation and refuse collection, the municipality lacks the funding to meet these obligations consistently, resulting in indigent households receiving inadequate to no services" (**NLMP4**)

"We depend on equitable shares to provide free potable water and sanitation services; this funding is inadequate for us to provide everyone with water and sanitation" (**ADMP2**)

In terms of lack of capacity, the participants highlighted that;

"The municipality lacks the capacity to implement the NFMIP effectively, and this has led to inefficiencies in identifying eligible households and providing them with the necessary support. Capacity constraints often delay the processing of indigent applications, leaving many eligible households without access to basic services" **(ADMP1)**

"The implementation of the NFMIP is negatively affected by a lack of capacity as we are struggling to have the manpower to implement the indigent policies" **(NLMP5)**

On lack of policy clarity, the participants indicated the following,

"The national framework does not specify the number of households to be assisted or clear timeframes. It states that the aim was to alleviate poverty by 2012, yet in 2024 this target remains unmet, rendering the framework outdated. As a result of a lack of a specific number of households to be assisted within a given timeframe, it becomes very difficult to determine if the framework is making meaningful progress in alleviating poverty and ensuring access to basic services. This lack of quantifiable goals undermines the ability to track the effectiveness of the framework" (**BCMMP2**)

"I feel that, at times, the indigent support fails to reach its intended beneficiaries because of a lack of realistic qualifying criteria as it requires a lot of paperwork, which is not feasible for the rural population" (**ADMP1**)

"The municipality is experiencing a decline in the number of people applying for indigent support because in the past the municipality has failed them as at times it failed to provide all the services, the standard of services as stipulated within

the framework are insufficient, and the qualification criteria are not clear"
(**NLMP4**)

The statements indicate that the NFMIP tends to be ineffective in the selected municipalities as they are experiencing limited financial resources, lack of capacity, and lack of policy clarity. This is in line with the literature where Howlett et al. (2018), Wu et al. (2017) and Peters et al. (2018) argue that lack of capacity and limited financial resources significantly undermine policy effectiveness by restricting the ability of governments to implement, manage, and sustain public policy, leading to poor service delivery and failure to meet intended outcomes. In addition, the study revealed that NFMIP's effectiveness is undermined by a lack of clarity on timeframes for how the policy has to be executed and a lack of realistic qualification criteria. This finding correlates with the literature, where Abdullahi and Othman (2020) argue that for a policy to be effective, its objectives must be apparent to those responsible for implementing it. Abdullahi and Othman (2020) argue that for a policy to be effective, its objectives must be clear to those who are responsible for implementing it. According to the NFMIP (2003), the overall objective of the framework is to substantially eradicate elements of poverty over which local government has control by 2012.

The statement from the participants clearly indicates that the NFMIP has failed to be effective because it still focuses on 2012. Approximately 448,000 people in BCMM are living in poverty, and most of these people are African (black) (BCMM Annual Report 2022; Eastern Cape Socio-economic Consultative Council (ECSECC) 2019). According to the ADM Annual Report (2021), the municipality has a population of just over 914,820, and 67.27% of the population within ADM lives in poverty. Close to 63% of the population in NLM is living in poverty (NLM Annual Report 2023). Given these, all the municipalities have failed to alleviate poverty as the number of indigents in these municipalities has increased, and this is attributed to the failure of the national framework to define the baseline and the target to be achieved at a particular time.

Theme 2: Efficiency

The second E, stipulated by the study's theory, is efficiency. In assessing the efficiency of the NFMIP in the selected municipalities, participants were asked if resources are allocated effectively to achieve the policy objectives, if the process is streamlined and provides robust

data management practices. This study revealed that insufficient resources are allocated towards indigents; getting people to access free basic services involves a long process and fragmented data management system. Participants highlighted the following;

> *"From my experience as an official within the municipality, it is evident that the NFMIP lacks the necessary infrastructure to ensure efficient service delivery. The current indigent application process is outdated and fragmented, resulting in prolonged wait times for indigent beneficiaries seeking assistance"* (**BCMMP3**)
>
> *"The failure of the NFMIP to provide guidelines for maintaining accurate and up-to-date indigent registers complicates efforts to effectively identify and serve those in need"* (**ADMP7**)
>
> *"The NFMIP's failure to provide robust data management practices led to inaccuracies in the indigent register, directly impacting resource and service allocation" (*NLMP5**)

Literature supports these observations, indicating that poor implementation of indigent policies often stems from inadequate administrative systems and a lack of cohesive data management (Zhou & Utete, 2023; Mergoni & De Wittea, 2021). Furthermore, studies have shown that municipalities struggle with maintaining effective registers due to insufficient technological support and training, ultimately hindering their ability to respond promptly to community needs (Nyatanga, 2023). The failure to streamline application processes creates barriers for potential beneficiaries and results in inefficient use of municipal resources (Charbonneau et al., 2025). Additionally, without real-time updates on service provision, municipalities cannot adequately assess the effectiveness of their policies or make informed adjustments as needed (Tzavaras et al., 2023). Consequently, these systemic inefficiencies within the NFMIP contribute to ongoing challenges in delivering equitable and effective support to indigent populations across municipalities (Abdelghani et al., 2024).

Theme 3: Ethical Considerations

In line with the 5-E approach, the third E is ethical considerations, which entail the extent to which the NFMIP and the implementation of indigent policies respect indigents' rights to dignity and confidentiality. Analysing the NFMIP and aligning it to ethical consideration is critical in this study as it assesses fairness and justice and how the framework respects the dignity and rights of indigents. Participants were asked if the NFMIP explicitly

incorporated measures that protect and promote indigent individuals' inherent dignity and rights, ensuring their access to basic services. Participants in the study highlighted that;

> *"The lack of synergy between the NFMIP and other poverty alleviation strategies and economic development initiatives raises ethical concerns about the impact of indigent policy. These indigent policies are implemented in isolation without considering the root causes of poverty or the potential for long-term empowerment of indigent households. Focusing only on service delivery does not address the systemic issues perpetuating poverty and inequalities, violating the ethical principle of promoting human dignity and self-determination"* (**BCMMP5**)

> "*We are often asked to report on indigent policy quarterly for compliance, and the absence of robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms raises questions regarding the accountability and integrity of the NFMIP implementation. There tends to be little oversight or follow-up on indigent policy implementation, and in most instances, feedback from indigent households is not considered. This lack of accountability means that the needs and concerns of the most vulnerable members of our communities are not being adequately addressed, which is a breach of the ethical principles of social justice and equity"* (**ADMP7**)

The reflection from the study participants revealed that the national framework failed to pass the ethical test in its current format because it does not address the systemic issues perpetuating poverty and inequalities, violating the ethical principle of promoting human dignity and self-determination. In addition, the national framework does not provide accountability mechanisms, and this lack of accountability is in breach of the ethical principles of social justice and equity. These findings are in deviation from the literature where scholars argue that to achieve some of the ethical considerations, there is a need for a democratic dialogue where the people affected by the policy actively partake in decision-making since democratic rights and opportunities are a core dimension of human needs (Andrzej, 2015; Hermans & Cunningham, 2013). Max-Neef et al. (1991) identified participation as one of the nine 'axiological' needs. On the other hand, Doyal and Gough (1991) postulate that political participation is a precondition for needs satisfaction. Khotami (2017) indicates accountability mechanisms are vital ethical considerations in public policy because they foster officials and institutions to act responsibly, transparently and in the public's best interest. A lack of

accountability mechanisms, as highlighted by the participants, is a clear manifestation that the NFMIP has failed the ethical consideration test.

Theme 4: Equity and Fairness

The fourth E is Equity and fairness, which entails just treatment and distribution of resources among all citizens. The participants were asked if they believe all groups have equal access to basic services. The study revealed that the NFMIP does not meet the standards outlined in the framework of equity and fairness, as this study noted that the criteria identified by the framework for identifying indigents are not fair. The NFMIP indicates that indigents must provide IDs when applying for indigent support, and the selected municipalities follow this, as reported by one participant who said that:

> *"The qualification criteria for indigent status vary significantly across municipalities, leading to inequitable service access. In BCMM, the income threshold for qualifying as indigent is set at R3,200 per month, while Nqushwa municipality sets their threshold as low as R1,600. This discrepancy creates confusion and unfairness, as households in similar financial situations may receive different levels of support based solely on their municipality's criteria. Such inequity not only perpetuates disparities among indigent populations but also undermines the overarching goal of the national framework to provide a safety net for all indigent households"* (**BCMMP1**)

Another participant indicated that the NFMIP failed to achieve equity and fairness because of the service standard:

> *"The service standards established by the national framework are not uniformly applied, resulting in inconsistent levels of support for indigent households. In our municipality, indigents are provided with 6 kilolitres of free potable water courtesy of ADM and 50 kWh of free electricity per month, but BCMM offers more generous subsidies and additional services, such as free burials. This lack of standardisation means that the quality of life for indigent households can vary drastically depending on where they live, contrary to the principles of equity and fairness that the national framework aims to uphold"* (**NLMP6)**

Another participant indicated that:

> *"The targeting options for identifying indigent households are often inadequate, particularly for indigents living in informal settlements. Many eligible households*

remain unregistered in ADM because of ineffective outreach and awareness campaigns. The existing targeting mechanisms do not account for the unique challenges faced by these populations, such as mobility and unstable living conditions. As a result, many individuals who qualify for assistance are overlooked, while some ineligible households may receive benefits, further exacerbating inequities within the system" (**ADMP4)**

The statement revealed that, in its current form, the implementation of the NFMIP deviates from the tenets of equity and fairness. Johnson and Svara (2015) indicate that to achieve equity and fairness, people should be treated differently based on their circumstances, entailing that public policies should be fostered to benefit vulnerable people. However, this fails to justify why, with the NFMIP, people facing similar circumstances are treated differently. For instance, having different qualification thresholds for qualifying for support in different municipalities undermines the principle of equity and fairness. Sumra (2019) highlights that to achieve equity and fairness, discrimination should be minimised in accessing basic services. However, the application process for indigent support discriminates against people living in informal settlements and those renting and not owning properties. The unfairness of the framework is well documented in literature as scholars posit that in its current form, the NFMIP discriminates against the exact people it must be supporting (Fuo, 2021; Kuhlengisa, 2022; Pillay & Muteroko, 2022).

Theme 5: Establishment of Recommendations

The study noted that, in its current configuration, the NFMIP is not fit for purpose, as it has failed to achieve four of the five Es of policy analysis: effectiveness, efficiency, ethical consideration, and equity. The study contend that the establishment of clear and actionable recommendations may contribute to the achievement of these four Es. Accordingly, the study makes the following recommendations.

The NFMIP recognises the role of social workers in policy design, implementation, and evaluation. Municipalities may benefit from social work services by utilising social work practitioners' expertise in conducting professional means testing of indigent households. Social work professionals also play a critical role in upholding the ethical standards of the NFMIP. Social workers are bound by a professional code of ethics that mandates the promotion of equal access to opportunities, resources, and services to enable individuals to meet their

basic human needs (National Association of Social Workers, 2021). In addition, social workers serve as advocates for social change. Within the context of the NFMIP, social workers can advocate for fairness in access to FBS.

To enhance the effectiveness of the NFMIP, the study proposes strengthening policy implementation mechanisms. This requires the establishment of a robust framework for the effective implementation of indigent policies, including the development of clear guidelines and standardised procedures that all municipalities must follow to ensure consistency and transparency in the delivery of free basic services. Furthermore, the NFMIP should recognise the need for continuous skills development and training programmes for municipal employees involved in indigent policy implementation, in order to improve their understanding of the policy and enhance their operational capacity.

Based on the findings, the NFMIP is failing to promote efficiency. Hence, the study recommends the integration of technology into the administration of indigent policies to improve efficiency. The NFMIP should introduce initiatives that enable municipalities to streamline indigent application processes, maintain accurate indigent registers, and facilitate real-time updates on service provision. Such systems have the potential to reduce bureaucratic delays and improve access to services for beneficiaries.

To address the ethical and equity-related concerns identified in the study, it is recommended that the NFMIP enable municipalities to actively involve community stakeholders in policy development and review processes. The establishment of platforms for public consultation would ensure that the voices of indigent populations are heard and considered, thereby fostering a sense of ownership and accountability among beneficiaries.

To further address issues of fairness, municipalities should adopt a more targeted approach to defining indigency by considering a range of socio-economic factors beyond income alone. This may involve the implementation of a tiered system of benefits that recognises varying levels of need among indigent households, ensuring that those most in need receive adequate and appropriate support.

5. Discussion

The effectiveness of the NFMIP can be measured by establishing the extent to which policy goals are achieved, as well as the impact of the attainment of policy goals on the indigents. The main goal of the NFMIP is to alleviate poverty and ensure access to basic

services (water, sanitation, electricity) for individuals who cannot pay for the services. The study established that the municipalities are making great strides in ensuring that the indigents have access to FBS. However, some municipalities cannot provide all the basic services, resulting in some indigent households remaining unserved. For instance, the Amathole District Municipality only provides access to water and is facing financial challenges in ensuring full access to FBS for the indigents. Additionally, municipalities such as BCM, Ngqushwa Local Municipality and ADM have more than 448,000, 63% and 67.2% people living in poverty, respectively (BCMM, 2022; ECSECC, 2019; NLM, 2023). This questions the effectiveness of the NFMIP in alleviating poverty.

Furthermore, the NFMIP also aims to ensure that no one is left behind in accessing basic services. However, the study established that some indigent households are not accessing the FBS due to the failure of the municipalities to reach the intended beneficiaries. In this instance, the municipalities can tap into the expertise of the social work professionals who can assist in identifying the indigent households and facilitate their access to FBS since social workers are experienced in linking people with systems that provide individuals with services, opportunities and resources. In this way, the aims of the NFMIP might be achieved as the deserving households would be reached and served.

Efficiency relates to the optimisation of resources for service delivery. These resources include both financial and human resources. This study established that municipalities depend on the equitable share grant to finance the provision of FBS, but the grant is not solely for FBS. As such, municipalities utilise this grant for other services rendered by the municipalities. This results in insufficient resources to cater for the provision of FBS to all the indigents, thus limiting the NFMIP's efficiency. The municipalities' officials also highlighted the shortage of human resources for implementing the NFMIP, which also affects efficient service provision. Administrative capacity issues were also mentioned as a challenge in the studied municipalities, impeding the municipalities' ability to implement the NFMIP effectively and efficiently. In addition, most of the participants in this study highlighted that their municipalities rely on the equitable share grant to finance the provision of FBS to indigent households. Regarding the equitable share grant, municipalities are not obliged to utilise these funds solely to fund the provision of free basic services. However, municipalities use their discretion on how the grant is spent, which may hinder the municipality's ability to provide

these FBS. In line with these, the municipalities can use social work services to improve efficiency by assisting beneficiaries with documentation.

Ethical considerations relate to fairness and equity issues. Fairness relates to equal access to opportunities and resources (Statham et al., 2022). In the context of the NFMIP, this entails fair provision of FBS to indigent households, ensuring no discrimination. Additionally, issues of dignity and respect are also fundamental in the provision of these FBS, with the municipalities prioritising promoting human rights (Kuhlengisa et al., 2022). This study established that the municipalities fail to ensure equity and fairness because of their strict application processes. For instance, a participant in BCM indicated that to apply for FBS, one needs to produce a national identity document, proof of property ownership, and proof of income in the form of a bank statement. It is critical to note that most vulnerable households, particularly in rural areas, may fail to produce these required documents because most do not own bank accounts, and some do not even have national identity documents. Furthermore, some individuals rent and do not own property. As such, these individuals will not be able to apply for the FBS, yet they will be deserving.

In addition, the study's findings show that means testing of the indigent households is done by councillors, who are political office bearers. For an individual to qualify for the FBS, they need to submit a letter from the councillor stating that they are indigent. This results in potential biases, with ineligible individuals benefiting from the provision of FBS while those genuinely in need are excluded.

6. Conclusion

This study critically evaluated the National Framework for Municipal Indigent Policies (NFMIP) through the lens of the 5E policy framework, revealing that while the NFMIP is designed with the noble intentions of alleviating poverty and ensuring access to basic services for indigent populations, it falls short of meeting the standards established by the framework. Specifically, the findings indicate that although the NFMIP has achieved partial effectiveness in providing free basic services to many indigent households, significant gaps remain, particularly in addressing the ongoing poverty experienced by many individuals in the selected municipalities. Furthermore, the study highlights that the framework's efficiency is compromised due to limited financial resources, reliance on equitable shares for funding, and

ethical considerations that necessitate a focus on maintaining the dignity and rights of indigent individuals throughout the policy implementation process.

To enhance the efficacy of the NFMIP, this study advocates for integrating social work services within municipalities, emphasising that social workers can play a crucial role in accurately identifying indigent populations, maintaining updated registers, and ensuring ethical policy implementation. By bridging the gap between policy and practice, social work professionals can facilitate a more responsive and equitable service delivery system that meets immediate needs and contributes to long-term community empowerment and development. This integrated approach underscores the necessity of addressing operational challenges and ethical considerations to ensure municipal policies effectively support the most vulnerable households.

From the findings of this study, it was established that the NFMIP in South Africa has some critical shortcomings, including weak knowledge management and political interference. This provides evidence-based insights for targeted policy reforms to enhance service equity and implementation effectiveness. Additionally, by demonstrating the practical application of the 5E framework, this study offers a replicable evaluation approach that can be adapted for evaluating indigent policy frameworks globally, enhancing comparative policy learning and development in social protection systems.

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 the University of Pretoria. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relevant clearance(s) by the University of Pretoria.

AI Declaration

The author declares the use of AI in writing this paper. In particular, the authors utilised Grammarly for language and grammar correction. The authors take full responsibility for ensuring proper review and editing of the AI-generated content.

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