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EVALUATING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF HOUSEHOLD PRODUCERS WITH THE PRESIDENTIAL EMPLOYMENT STIMULUS IN MOPANI DISTRICT: AN IMPLEMENTATION ANALYSIS

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Abstract: The South African government has been grappling with unemployment issues for an extended period, a challenge exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, the Presidential Economic Stimulus (PES) food program was initiated to address the economic hardships arising from the pandemic and the persistent unemployment crisis in the country. The PES aims to generate employment opportunities for subsistence farmers and families engaged in backyard food production through direct public investments. Its primary focus is to assist vulnerable populations, including women, youth, individuals with disabilities, and child-headed households. This study aimed to analyse key implementation aspects of the PES, including Access and Awareness, Suitability and Timeliness of Support, Perceived Impact on Livelihoods, Challenges and Constraints, as well as Empowerment and Sustainability. A qualitative methodology was adopted, utilizing purposive sampling alongside snowball sampling to select 30 beneficiaries for ten in-depth interviews and five focus group discussions. Thematic data analysis was conducted using NVivo software. Findings revealed that most beneficiaries learned about the program through friends, with support from local extension officials in the application process. The PES proved effective in increasing food supply and household income; however, it faced several challenges that hindered its overall effectiveness. Long delays in receiving production inputs and inconsistent availability of necessary resources were notable issues. Beneficiaries received training on the safe use of chemicals prior to obtaining production inputs, but many felt that the PES support represented only a short-term solution, lacking a comprehensive long-term sustainability plan. The study concluded that while the PES offers valuable short-term benefits, future interventions should address logistical inefficiencies and prioritize the integration of long-term empowerment and sustainability strategies.

Keywords: lived experience, household producers, employment stimulus, Mopani district, implementation analysis

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1. Introduction

South Africa confronts numerous interrelated concerns that threaten the safety and welfare of its citizens. Prominent challenges include elevated unemployment rates, widespread poverty, and significant wealth inequalities (RSA, 2020). Recent estimates indicate that over fifty percent of the nation's populace lives beneath the poverty threshold, grappling to fulfil fundamental necessities, mostly attributable to the accumulation of wealth among a few elite factions of society (Altman, 2003). The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified socioeconomic disparities, leading to significant employment losses, particularly in essential sectors like tourism and hospitality that support the national economy (Bhorat et al., 2021). As a result, many individuals and families are in precarious circumstances, facing restricted resources and opportunities for progress, which profoundly affects the nation's social structure (Cronje, 2016). In reaction to these pressing socioeconomic issues, the South African government launched the Presidential Employment Stimulus (PES). This extensive program aims to enhance public investment and create sustainable employment possibilities, especially for the most vulnerable societal groups (The Presidency, 2021a). A principal aspect of the PES is its emphasis on the agricultural sector, which is crucial for improving food security, particularly for subsistence farmers and small-scale producers (The Presidency, 2021b). A multitude of these persons function beyond the formal economy, encountering substantial obstacles in obtaining vital resources such as funding, training, and technology (DALRRD, 2021).

The initiative is specifically designed to assist historically marginalized communities, including women, youth, individuals with disabilities, and households led by minors. The aim was to provide these communities with essential production inputs, including superior seeds, agricultural implements, and extensive training programs that can augment their revenue and elevate food output (Bhorat et al., 2021). The PES prioritizes enhancing food security, generating diverse income options, and cultivating economic resilience at the household level. The ultimate purpose of this empowerment project is to boost communities' capacity to navigate economic shocks and uncertainties more effectively (DALRRD, 2021). The Mopani District has become a crucial region for the effective execution of PES programs, demonstrating considerable potential for promoting environmental sustainability and enhancing community livelihoods through traditional farming techniques (Nengovhela, 2022). However, for large-scale government programs such as the PES to fulfil their aims, thorough planning, implementation, and coordination with local stakeholders are required. Interacting with farmers, community leaders, and pertinent stakeholders is essential for guaranteeing equitable and sustainable distribution of the program's benefits over time. Therefore, this ongoing research project aims to illuminate a key objective of a larger study that is organized into three interrelated phases: a thorough literature review, a qualitative study, and finally, a quantitative analysis. Both the literature review and the qualitative phase are completed to date. As a result, this study will focus on sharing the findings from the second phase, which employed qualitative methods to explore and document the lived experiences of beneficiaries of the Payment PES Programme. Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, to provide a compelling narrative that captures the personal stories, challenges, and perspectives of those involved in the program, highlighting the impact of PES on their livelihoods and the environment.

1.1 The Research Area of Study: The Mopani District in Limpopo Province, South Africa

The Mopani District is located in the northeastern region of South Africa's Limpopo Province. The area is predominantly rural, characterized by expansive open areas and tightly-knit communities that depend significantly on subsistence agriculture, while encountering several social and economic challenges (Nengovhela, 2022). The district is next to Zimbabwe and Mozambique and possesses a semi-arid climate. It remains predominantly rural, with multiple villages dispersed across its five local municipalities (Tswalano et al., 2025). Agriculture is crucial to the economy and the livelihoods of individuals in the region (MDM, 2022). Residents in this region predominantly depend on small-scale and subsistence agriculture for sustenance and income, despite the presence of extensive commercial cultivation of subtropical fruits and vegetables (Malaka, 2025).

Mopani confronts several significant issues that render its populations exceedingly vulnerable (Nengovhela, 2022). The region frequently experiences severe weather conditions, including prolonged droughts and intense rainfall, which adversely impact agriculture (Ntshongwana, 2019). Predictions indicate a significant increase in temperatures, exacerbating the strain on already limited water resources. The district concurrently has elevated levels of poverty and unemployment (Mkhonto & Musundire, 2019). Numerous families rely on social handouts, and employment opportunities beyond agriculture and mining are scarce (Nengovhela, 2022). Commercial agricultural, mining operations, and residential areas consistently vie for scarce water resources, exacerbated by climatic conditions (Philip & Turok, 2020). Mopani, akin to numerous other rural regions in South Africa, faces infrastructural and service delivery challenges that impede small-scale farmers' access to markets and adversely affect the overall economy (Cronje, 2016). Mopani is a significant agricultural region; yet, its potential is limited by a challenging environment, pervasive poverty, and the issues associated with a rural, agriculture-dependent economy (Tswalano et al., 2025).

The PES is a considerable public investment; however, its extensive implementation in numerous rural regions encounters considerable logistical and practical challenges. Quantitative data highlights the magnitude of the PES, offering insights into its dimensions, scope, and financial ramifications. Nonetheless, there is a significant deficiency of qualitative research examining the lived experiences of participants and undertaking an empirical investigation of the program's implementation. In the lack of this extensive qualitative analysis, officials are effectively navigating without a clear direction (Nengovhela, 2022). They are distributing billions of dollars in Rand based on data that lacks context, depth, or practical ideas. To guarantee that the PES transcends being a mere financial burden and becomes a legitimate public investment that yields substantial results and promotes beneficial transformation, it is imperative to heed, record, and scrutinize the narratives of the individuals it seeks to support. The viewpoints of these recipients provide the most significant dataset for enhancing, perfecting, and substantiating the future of PES in South Africa (Ntshongwana, 2019). A significant disparity frequently exists between policy formulation and real-world experiences. A thorough evaluation of the program's execution from the perspectives of its intended beneficiaries is essential for ensuring accountability and improving future policies (Van Rensburg & Van Rensburg, 2014). This study sought to fill this gap through evaluating the experiences of household producers with the PES program in the Mopani District. This study aimed at evaluating the execution of the Presidential Employment Stimulus (PES) and its anticipated effects on household producers in the Mopani District. This was accomplished by examining critical implementation dimensions, such as Access and

Awareness, Suitability and Timeliness of Support, Perceived Impact on Livelihoods, Challenges and Constraints, along with Empowerment and Sustainability.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 The description of the Study

The study was carried out across the three agroecological zones of the Mopani District in Limpopo Province, South Africa. This location was chosen because of its primarily rural demographic; a majority of people participate in subsistence and household food production. The characteristics of the Mopani District make it a crucial location for the execution of the PES program, because so many households in the area rely heavily on agriculture and natural resources for their sustenance (MDM, 2022). Figure 1 below illustrates that the district encompasses of three independently distinct agroecological zones: Mopani East, Mopani West, and Mopani North, with their locations represented in the accompanying map delineating each zone's boundaries.

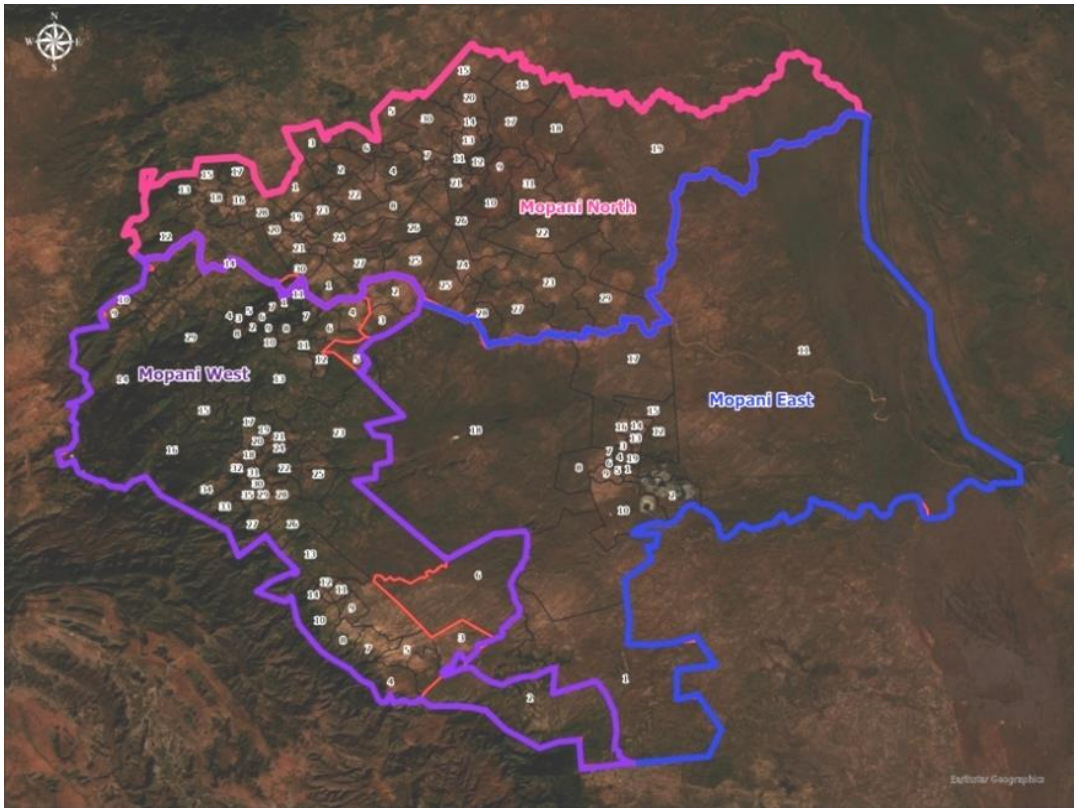


Figure 1: The demarcations of the three agroecological zones of Mopani District

2.2 Conceptual Framework spanning Research

A conceptual framework demonstrating the influence of the PES program on subsistence and household producers emphasizes governmental intervention and its consequential effects on farmers' capital assets and overall livelihood outcomes, significantly referencing the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) (Tambe, 2022). The primary element of the PES program specifically addresses this demographic by offering assistance through the acquisition of production inputs via procurement channels and their distribution to eligible vulnerable beneficiaries, prioritizing women, youth, individuals with disabilities, and child-headed households (LDARD, 2023). Figure 2 below illustrates the setting and progression of the intervention. The PES program is primarily designed to improve livelihoods by providing support with production inputs. The conceptual framework findings indicate that the intervention produces the intended results at both the household and community levels (Tambe, 2022). To guarantee the intervention's efficacy and enhance future policy assessment methods, evaluating the framework is crucial.

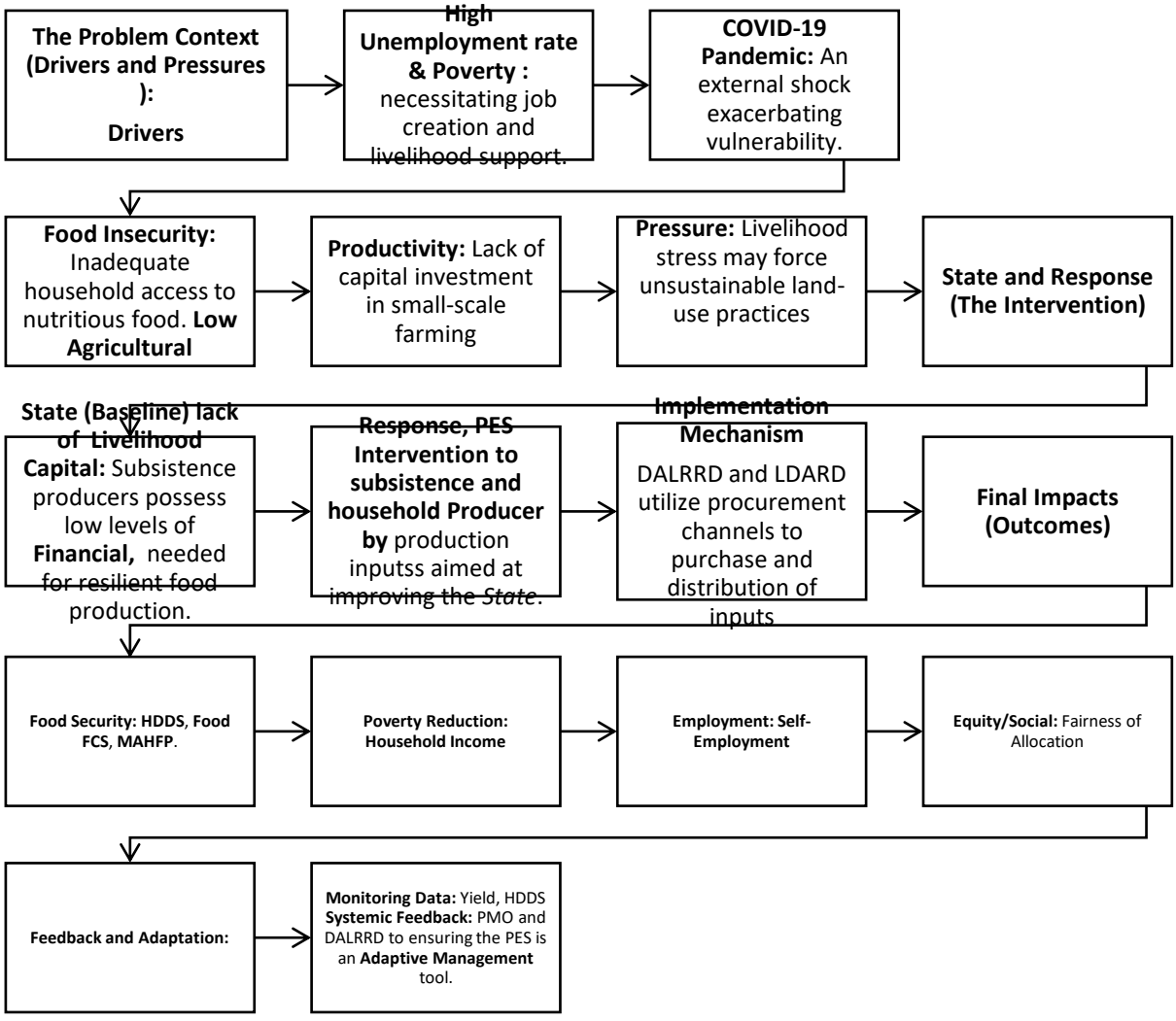


Figure 2: Conceptual framework of a Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (Tambe, 2022)

2.3 Overview of Research Design, Sampling Strategy, and Sample Size

This ongoing research project utilises an exploratory sequential mixed model design, aims to illuminate a key objective of a larger study that is organized into three interrelated phases: a thorough literature review, a qualitative study, and finally, a quantitative analysis. Both the literature review and the qualitative phase are completed to date. As a result, this study will focus on sharing the findings from the second phase, which employed qualitative methods to explore and document the lived experiences of beneficiaries of the Payment PES Programme. Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, to provide a compelling narrative that captures the personal stories, challenges, and perspectives of those involved in the program, highlighting the impact of PES on their livelihoods and the environment. As shown in Figure 3 below, the objective of Phase 1: Literature Review was to put systems in place for building a foundation that would assist in understanding the main research topic at hand and to be able to pinpoint the existing knowledge gaps. The activities of the phase involved gathering and analysing documents such as scholarly articles, government and non-governmental websites and other relevant documents to give a direction to the next steps Phase 2: Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis, was mainly on exploring the in-depth of the topic to gain a rich understanding of perspectives from the participants, which included collection and analysing non-numerical data in the form of interviews and focus group discussions, wherein the findings were guided the development of third phase`s quantitative instruments. Therefore, in order to archive the objectives of Phase 2 of this study a qualitative research technique was employed to thoroughly investigate the experiences, attitudes, and viewpoints of beneficiaries involved in the PES program. The in-depth interviews and focus group discussions employed to better understand the varied and complex narratives of those affected by the program (Patton, 2015). This methodological approach is especially beneficial for analysing intricate social interactions, enabling a detailed comprehension of the PES initiative's execution, the difficulties faced by beneficiaries, and the program's overall efficacy in fostering sustainable practices within the community (Cloete & Wissink, 2018).

A non-probability sampling method was utilized to acquire a representative sample. This methodology employed both purposive and snowball sampling techniques. A varied group of reliable sources with extensive understanding of the PES program and direct experience was strategically identified. These informants were essential in discovering and recommending supplementary individuals taking part in the program. This referral method generated a cascading effect, facilitating access to an expanded network of community members. The sample consisted of 30 participants who provided their opinions through interviews or focus group discussions, promoting inclusive engagement.

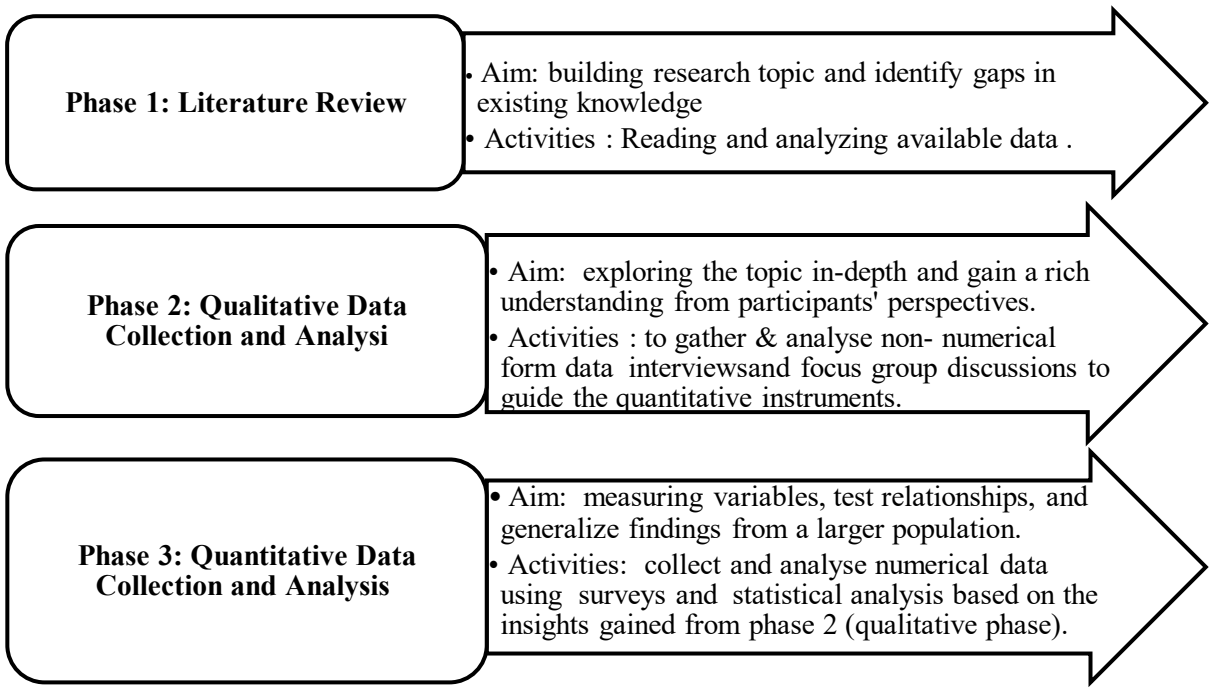


Figure 3: implementation phases of the mega study

2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The primary data collection comprised semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Ten individual interviews and five group discussions were performed using a flexible interview guide featuring open-ended questions focused on the study's five main topics and objectives. This flexible methodology guaranteed uniformity across the interviews while allowing for the investigation of emerging themes and personal narratives. The focus group discussions provide an interactive setting for participants to express their opinions and experiences about the expected effects of the PES program.

All gathered data, including audio recordings and detailed field notes, was thoroughly transcribed in full to maintain the depth of participants' input. Subsequent to transcription, a thematic analysis was performed to methodically find, scrutinize, and document patterns and themes within the material. The qualitative data analysis program NVivo streamlined data organizing and coding. This meticulous analytical method guaranteed that participants' feedback was assessed comprehensively and systematically, revealing intricate insights into the program's influence within the community.

3. Results and Discussion

The results of this study are organized based on the five primary themes derived from the research objectives. Table 1 presents a summary of the demographic profile of the participants (n=30), indicating a predominance of females relative to males, mostly due to females' greater involvement in home farming activities, particularly in rural regions.

Table 1: demographic profile of participants

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Genda	Female	21	70.0
	Male	9	30.0
Age	Youth (<35 years)	12	40.0
	Adult (35-55 years)	13	43.3
	Older Adult (>55 years)	5	16.7
Total		30	100

3.1 Access and Awareness

The majority of respondents indicated that their awareness of the Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) project originated mostly from informal sources. Personal networks significantly facilitated the dissemination of information, as producers became aware of the project through discussions with friends, neighbours, or prominent community leaders. This reliance on word-of-mouth indicates a notable deficiency in official communication from the Department of Agriculture, as demonstrated in Table 2 below. Although many saw the application procedure as uncomplicated, several voiced apprehensions about its somewhat passive character. Interested parties were mandated to submit their names to local departmental officials and subsequently await notification concerning their selection and the schedule for input delivery. This passive interaction may have impeded wider participation, since individuals lacking knowledge about the program could have readily overlooked the opportunity to engage.

Table 2: Primary Sources of Program Information for Beneficiaries

Source	Percent (%)
Word-of-Mouth from Peers	73
Community Leaders	17
Departmental Officials/Extension Officers	10
Formal Media (Radio, Posters)	0

3.2 Suitability and Timeliness of Support

A comprehensive examination of this dimension revealed significant deficiencies in the program's execution. Beneficiaries conveyed appreciation for the support received, yet several articulated reservations about the suitability of the production inputs for their particular agricultural requirements. A vegetable farmer indicated that they received fertilizer intended for maize, which was incompatible with the nutritional needs of their crops. Moreover, a continual problem was the delays in obtaining

critical supplies. Seeds and fertilizers often arrived much post the ideal planting timeframe, undermining their effectiveness and requiring modifications in agricultural methods. The delays negatively impacted crop output and hindered long-term agricultural planning.

3.3 Perceived Impact on Livelihoods

Notwithstanding the recognized limitations, the PES program clearly yielded immediate advantages for participating individuals, as demonstrated by Figure 4 below. Participants consistently indicated that, despite experiencing delivery delays, the agricultural inputs positively impacted their food supply at home. A multitude of individuals successfully marketed excess produce in local markets, substantially augmenting household income. This supplementary income was crucial in meeting essential requirements, like acquiring food, settling educational fees, and managing healthcare costs. Despite ongoing obstacles, the economic advancements fostered a sense of hope among numerous people

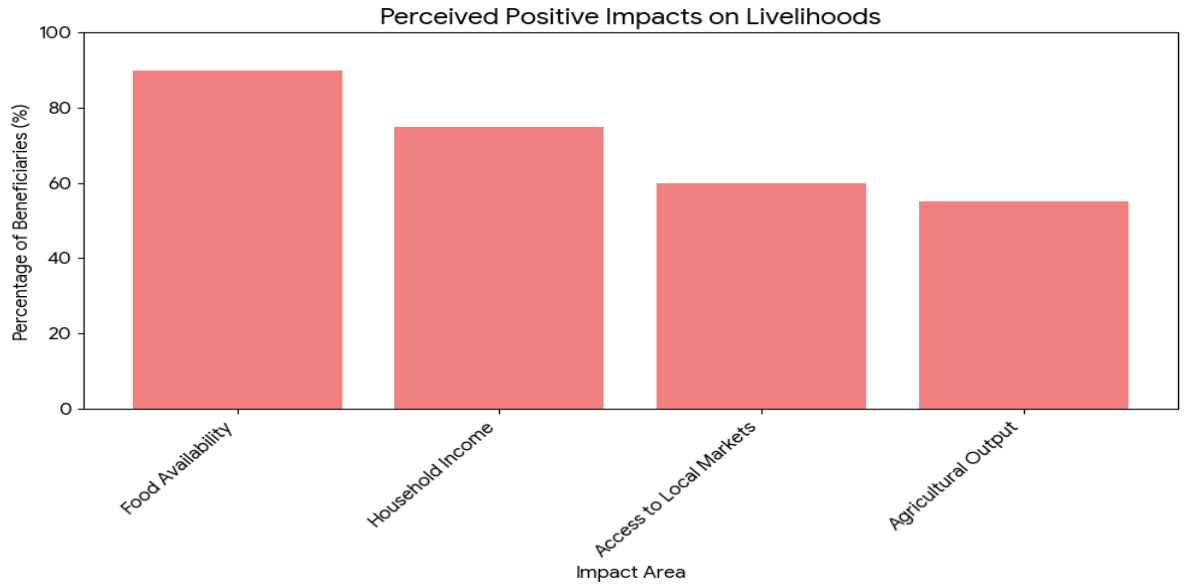


Figure 4: PES perceived impact on livelihoods

3.4 Challenges and Constraints

Participants recognized delays in resource collection and distribution as the principal impediment to the program's effectiveness. Numerous beneficiaries attributed these delays on the logistical firms engaged by the government. These disruptions in the supply chain not only caused confusion but also fostered frustration among farmers, ultimately compromising the program's overall success. The agricultural cycles required for prompt planting and harvesting were misaligned with the program's frequently inflexible execution timelines. This imbalance limited the program's capacity to promote sustainable agriculture practices.

3.5 Empowerment and Long-term Sustainability

The PES program included a skills transfer element that enhanced participants' sense of empowerment. Numerous recipients indicated that they received useful instruction on the safe application of agricultural pesticides and environmentally sustainable farming practices, perceiving this as a laudable element of the effort. Most participants expressed the concern that the support offered was only a "temporary relief" rather than a comprehensive approach for attaining long-term self-sufficiency. The singular provision of inputs, along with the lack of continuous support or systems to link farmers to extensive market networks, indicated that any gains obtained were likely to be transient. Participants voiced concern that, without ongoing help, they would probably return to a condition of vulnerability once the provided resources were exhausted.

4. Conclusion

The findings indicate a common problem in development programming: an intervention may produce both beneficial and detrimental effects. The Presidential Employment Stimulus (PES) offered prompt assistance to at-risk households in the Mopani District, highlighting the essential function of direct public investment in subsistence agriculture to improve food security and elevate household incomes, as acknowledged by its advocates. The positive effects on food availability and access to local markets underscore the importance of such aid, notwithstanding the inherent limitations of its execution. Nonetheless, operational shortcomings undermined the overall efficacy of the initiative. The dependence on informal communication methods for program awareness highlights an urgent necessity for government agencies to enhance their communication strategies, guaranteeing equal access to information for all stakeholders. Moreover, problems concerning the provision of unsuitable inputs and extended delays expose critical deficiencies in the procurement and logistics system. Numerous top-down agricultural support initiatives fail because of a misalignment with agricultural seasons, so compromising the output improvements these programs intend to facilitate. Furthermore, the belief that the PES serves only as a provisional solution generates significant apprehensions about its enduring viability. While the training aspect of the program signifies a beneficial advancement toward empowerment, the primary focus on input distribution categorizes the PES more as a relief-oriented project rather than a developmental plan. For sustainable agricultural success, it is essential to transcend the basic provision of inputs to include capacity building, improved market connections, and the creation of favourable conditions for ongoing progress. The study's result, indicating that the PES insufficiently emphasized empowerment and sustainability, corresponds with persistent criticisms of short-term relief initiatives that frequently fail to promote lasting economic development.

The PES program functioned as a crucial, though transient, intervention for homestead producers in the Mopani District, enhancing food security and household income, so playing a vital role in economic

recovery following the epidemic. However, the initiative's complete potential was hindered by significant implementation issues, primarily marked by delays in the delivery of appropriate materials and logistical inefficiencies. Although recipients gained empowerment from training opportunities, the dominant impression persisted that the program provided only short-term alleviation with restricted long-term advantages for sustainable livelihood enhancement.

In light of the findings, the following recommendations are put forth to improve the efficacy of future agricultural support programs: The government should amend its procurement procedures to guarantee timely delivery of agricultural supplies in accordance with local planting seasons. Adopting a more participatory methodology that engages recipients in the selection of inputs will enhance their suitability. An extensive communication plan is crucial to enhance awareness of program options fairly and widely. This should include local radio, community gatherings, and the participation of extension professionals. Future endeavours should transcend the mere provision of inputs. A comprehensive strategy is essential to cultivate enduring resilience and empowerment, encompassing consistent mentoring, financial management education, and substantial assistance for market access. The forthcoming study must extend beyond assessing implementation to cultivate a comprehensive grasp of the lasting advantages of these treatments. It is vital to conduct a targeted study to evaluate the long-term effects of the PES on empowerment, wealth accumulation, and the sustainability of home farming practices.

Acknowledgements

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: interview guide with PES beneficiaries

EVALUATING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF HOUSEHOLD PRODUCERS WITH THE PRESIDENTIAL EMPLOYMENT STIMULUS IN MOPANI DISTRICT: AN IMPLEMENTATION ANALYSIS

by MOHLATSO ANNA MNISI (9911109) Project No: TREC/320/2025: PG

Participant NO.

Name of Agroecological zone

Name of facilitator

Venue

Date and time

LANGUAGE/S USED

Instructions: Thank you for agreeing to participate. I want to inform you again that this conversation will be recorded. The discussion will take approximately 60 minutes. I will put a question to you and feel free to answer and contribute to the language that you are comfortable with.

Access & Awareness (recruitment)

1. Tell me what you know about the PES programme
2. What was the strategy used to invite you to take part?
3. Kindly elaborate on the actual procedures used attract you as one of the beneficiaries
4. Do you think you are the right beneficiary for this support?
5. How were you informed about this PES and by who?
6. Did you apply for this support?
7. How were you or the community informed about the outcome of your application?

Suitability & Timeliness (production inputs

8. Did you receive any inputs from this PES programme?
9. What kind of inputs did you receive?
10. Are the inputs received distributed at the right time and suitable for your area?
11. Were the inputs delivered as promised?
12. Did you experience any mismatch

Perceived Impact

13. Did experience any change after using PES production inputs
14. In general, do you think PES improved food production in your home?
15. As compared to other years, did you manage to have a surplus and what did you do about it?
16. Are you satisfied with this support?
17. What do you think the department can do to improve the services of this intervention?

Challenges & Constraints

18. What are the challenges and problems you had in line with logistics?
19. In your own words what could be the challenges in deliveries?
20. In general, what do you think will solve these challenges going forward

Empowerment & Sustainability

21. Is there any trainings that you are receiving from the department through PES programme and what are those
22. Is this support once off or is ongoing, according to your knowledge?
23. Do you think this support was enough to break the cycle of requiring assistance yearly?

Bonus

24. If you were to be given a chance of advising the government about PES, what would be that advice?

Thank you for your participation. We have come to the end of this discussion.

Appendix 2 : Focus group discussion guideline

EVALUATING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF HOUSEHOLD PRODUCERS WITH THE PRESIDENTIAL EMPLOYMENT STIMULUS IN MOPANI DISTRICT: AN IMPLEMENTATION ANALYSIS

by MOHLATSO ANNA MNISI (9911109) Project No: TREC/320/2025: PG

Name of focus group

Name of Agroecological zone

Name of facilitator

Venue

Date and time

LANGUAGE/S USED

Genda of participants; P1,P2,P3,P4

Age of participants ; P1,P2,P3,P4

Instructions: Thank you for agreeing to participate. I want to inform you again that this conversation will be recorded. The discussion will take approximately 60 minutes.

This is a group discussion, and we request all to observe principles of respect, affording each other space to talk. I will put a question to you and all of you must contribute to the language that you are comfortable with.

Access & Awareness (recruitment)

1. Tell me what you know about the PES programme
2. What was the strategy used to invite you to take part?
3. Kindly elaborate on the actual procedures used attract you as one of the beneficiaries
4. Do you think you are the right beneficiary for this support?
5. How were you informed about this PES and by who?
6. Did you apply for this support?
7. How were you or the community informed about the outcome of your application?

Suitability & Timeliness (production inputs

8. Did you receive any inputs from this PES programme?
9. What kind of inputs did you receive?
10. Are the inputs received distributed at the right time and suitable for your area?

11. Were the inputs delivered as promised?
12. Did you experience any mismatch

Perceived Impact

13. Did experience any change after using PES production inputs
14. In general, do you think PES improved food production in your home?
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Challenges & Constraints

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Empowerment & Sustainability

21. Are there any trainings that you are receiving from the department through the PES programme and what are those
22. Is this support one-off or is ongoing, according to your knowledge?
23. Do you think this support was enough to break the cycle of requiring assistance yearly?

Bonus

24. What are the collective recommendations from this group?

Thank you for your participation. We have come to the end of this discussion.

Appendix 3: ethical Approval

University of Limpopo
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TURFLOOP RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

ETHICS CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

MEETING: **17 June 2025**

PROJECT NUMBER: **TREC/320/2025: PG**

PROJECT:

Title:	Evaluating Food Security Status of Presidential Employment Stimulus Beneficiaries: A Case of Mopani District, Limpopo Province, South Africa
Researcher:	MA Mnisi
Supervisor:	Dr. TJ Nesengani
Co-Supervisor/s:	Prof. EM Zwane
School:	Agricultural and Environmental Sciences
Degree:	Doctor Philosophy in Agriculture

PROF. KM CHUENE
CHAIRPERSON: TURFLOOP RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

The Turfloop Research Ethics Committee (TREC) is registered with the National Health Research Ethics Council, Registration Number: **REC-0310111-031**

Note:

i) **This Ethics Clearance Certificate will be valid for one (1) year, as from the abovementioned date. Application for annual renewal (or annual review) need to be received by TREC one month before lapse of this period.**

ii) **Should any departure be contemplated from the research procedure as approved, the researcher(s) must re-submit the protocol to the committee, together with the Application for Amendment form.**

iii) **PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER IN ALL ENQUIRIES.**

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