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Reflections on using community-based action research with a group of women/youth to explore the socio-emotional factors that enhance or inhibit participation in sustainable poverty alleviation initiatives

Unemployment among youth and women is a serious crisis in South Africa. Witnessing the high levels of unemployment and accompanying lack of financial independence among youth and women in my own community where I live, urged me to explore this phenomenon in greater depth. I embarked on this study with the belief that each individual person has their own unique life stories which led them to becoming unemployed and which would be important to understand if we were to address this challenge in sustainable ways.

In my work with communities, I have found that people are often provided with opportunities, ideas and training to generate their own income, but that there appears to be intrinsic and extrinsic factors that interfere with their sustainable engagement in these opportunities. I anticipated that an exploration of the experiences and decision-making processes of unemployed people could provide greater insight into what these barriers are, why they are there and how they influence the ways in which these young people navigate such barriers. This study therefore focussed on exploring the experiences of six young women, between the ages of 18 and 34, who participated in a Social Impact partnership initiative. The aim of the study was to gain deeper insight into how collaborative approaches could be used to address youth and women unemployment.

Using semi-structured individual interviews and focus group interviews with the six women, as well as visual artefacts created by the women themselves (such as collages and drawings), I found that the economic empowerment of women entails more than just capacity building or skills training. Economic empowerment is also significantly influenced by aspects related to socio-emotional intelligence. The results of this study highlighted a number of socio-emotional factors, such as engaging in regular self-reflection, critical decision-making and commitment to shared goals, as crucial aspects to include for poverty alleviation initiatives to be truly successful and sustainable. Women economic empowerment has thus been revealed as extending beyond personal and professional empowerment. It also calls for fundamental shifts in how economic, social and mental well-being of women are perceived and enabled.