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Application of Evaluative Thinking to Social and Labour Plan Community Development Projects in the Steve Tshwete Local Municipality

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A research report submitted to the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, University of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management in Public and Development Sector Monitoring and Evaluation

DECLARATION

I, Busani Tshabangu, declare that this research report entitled 'Application of Evaluative Thinking to Social and Labour Plan Community Development Projects in Steve Tshwete Local Municipality' is my unaided work. I have acknowledged, attributed, and referenced all ideas sourced elsewhere. I am hereby submitting it in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Management in the field of Public Sector Monitoring and Evaluation at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. I have not submitted this report before for any other degree or examination to any other institution.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DMRE	Department of Mineral Resources and Energy
ET	Evaluative Thinking
IDP	Integrated Development Plan
LED	Local Economic Development
MPRDA	Mineral Petroleum Resource Development Act
SLP	Social and Labour Plan
STLM	Steve Tshwete Local Municipality

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ABSTRACT

Mining communities in Mpumalanga are generally heavily reliant on the mining economy and may face unprecedented economic upheaval and decline in the event of a mine closure. Prudent and meticulous planning by municipal authorities and mining companies to develop alternative economies for affected communities can reduce the negative effects of mine closure to tolerable levels. The Steve Tshwete Local Municipality (STLM) is a coal-rich area. However, it faces the challenge of developing alternative economies in the aftermath of coal mine closures and depletion in affected communities. However, the weak application of evaluative thinking strategies in the municipality has led to persistent gaps in evaluation utilisation and limited institutional learning. These shortcomings have contributed to missed opportunities for more sustainable and inclusive development planning, undermining the effectiveness of municipal interventions meant to address the complex socio-economic challenges associated with mine closures. This research study will investigate the extent to which STLM applies evaluative thinking strategies in planning and developing sustainable alternative economic projects to mitigate the adverse effects of mine closure.

The study will also generate recommendations and suggestions for integrating evaluative thinking approaches into STLM development planning. A qualitative approach was used to gather data through semi-structured interviews. The sample of participants was drawn from key stakeholders, including municipal and business decision-makers, members of civil society, and community leaders. The data was analysed using a thematic approach, and the findings were integrated and summarised from the large volume of data obtained. The findings indicate that, although there is some limited use of evidence-based planning processes within the municipality, there is a significant opportunity to integrate evaluative thinking practices across the board. There is a need for systematic, deliberate steps to inform, train, and develop a culture of evaluative thinking that will improve decision-making processes and the effective deployment of resources to create alternative economies to mining. The research study reveals how the lack of evidence-based planning in the creation and implementation of development projects can result in ineffective and poor use of scarce resources in mining areas. The importance of implementing evaluative thinking techniques in project planning and management is highlighted, especially in local authorities' attempts to mitigate socio-economic decline in mining communities.

Keywords: Evaluative thinking; Corporate social responsibility; Local Economic Development; Social and Labour Plan

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

1.1 Background

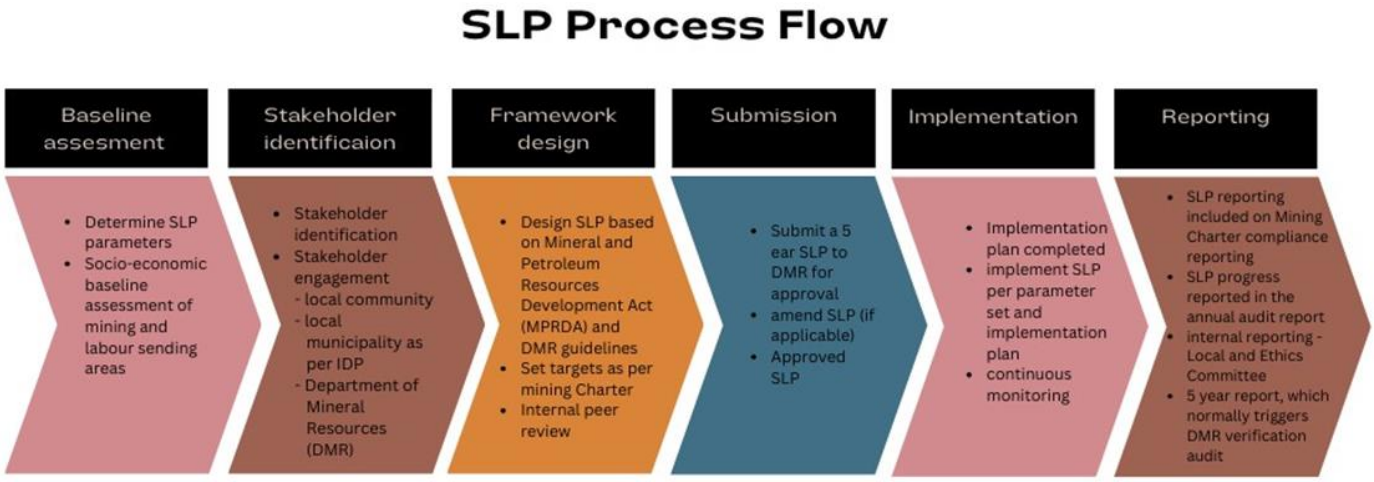
The mining sector in South Africa contributes about 6.2% to the national gross domestic product (GDP) in the four central mining provinces of Mpumalanga, North-West and Gauteng (StatsSA, 2025). Given its significant economic contribution, the mining sector plays a role in job creation, infrastructure development, and economic growth in mining and non-mining communities. However, its social and environmental responsibilities have come under increasing scrutiny as the country pursues racially inclusive and sustainable development goals. The Department of Mineral Resources and Energy (DMRE) serves as a regulatory authority and oversees that mining companies adhere to legislative frameworks that promote health, safety, the environment, and community development in the communities in which they operate. A key legislative instrument in this regard is the Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act (MPRDA) of 2002, which mandates that all mining houses prepare and submit a mining plan, an environmental plan, and a Social and Labour Plan (SLP) to obtain a mining right. An SLP outlines a mining company's commitments to its employees and surrounding communities and typically spans a five-year implementation period. It details the specific development objectives, timelines, and financial allocations intended to mitigate the adverse socio-economic effects of mining and promote sustainable local development (Marais et al., 2022; Maseko et al., 2024).

The MPRDA requires mining companies to commit to developing their communities as a precondition for obtaining and maintaining the requisite licences and mining permits (Marais et al., 2022). To obtain and maintain a mining licence, mines must allocate a portion of their profits to development projects in accordance with the municipality's development plan. Each local municipality in South Africa must develop an integrated development plan (IDP), a five-year strategic plan that identifies priority development needs, outlines interventions, and aligns with both provincial and national development frameworks. Accordingly, all SLPs must be harmonised with the municipality's IDP to ensure coherence between corporate social investment initiatives and local government planning cycles (Marais et al., 2022).

The SLP has various components, including employment equity plans and mine community development plans to ensure job security and the creation of new employment opportunities, to manage downscaling and the possible closure of mining operations. For this study, a central component of the SLP is the Local Economic Development (LED), which focuses on stimulating economic growth, job creation, and poverty reduction within host communities. The LED component of the SLP focuses on mine community development to boost the municipality's economic growth and improve people's quality of life. Public-private partnerships are among the drivers of economic growth in the municipality (DMRE, 2008). Maseko et al. (2024) state that a beneficiary of mining rights must develop and implement a comprehensive development program that encompasses equity plans that promote and foster transformation in the mining sector. The SLP also includes social development plans and processes to mitigate job losses during downscaling or mine closure. The holder of an SLP is legally obligated to submit an annual report to the relevant Regional Manager detailing how they are complying with the SLP's provisions (Maseko et al., 2024).

A local municipality's Integrated Development Plan (IDP) details areas of development within the municipality's wards, as identified by various stakeholders. It is an important document that acts as a "principal strategic planning instrument which guides and informs all planning, budgeting, management and decision-making processes in the municipality" (STLM, 1DP; 2020-2021;12). The IDP is valid for a) guiding municipal development planning, b) obtaining funding from government and private companies, c) eradicating the apartheid legacy by integrating services to rural and urban areas and d) aligning with regional and national spheres of government. Figure 1 below summarises the SLP process flow, highlighting crucial components of the stages discussed above.

Figure 1: An SLP process flow and its relationship with municipalities, communities and DMR



*Source: (adapted from KPMG (*2013*), cited by Thobatsi (2014)*

The paper discusses how ET can be used to ensure the sustainability of SLP community development projects after mine closure. It focuses on community development projects funded by mining companies under the SLP and implemented in partnership with the municipality's local economic development department. Syahrir et al (2021) emphasise the need to develop standard practices for monitoring and measuring the effectiveness of development projects. Singh et al. (2018) attest to this, noting that companies often leave the critical task of monitoring and evaluation to implementing partners. In addition, they need more capacity to conduct these activities. Monitoring and evaluation are important for ensuring a project's success, as they provide opportunities to adjust and improve outcomes. Hence, the absence of effective monitoring and evaluation measures creates a significant risk that SLP projects will struggle once the mine closes. Effective resource deployment requires relevant stakeholders to evaluate the sustainability of projects. Lu et al. (2019) assert that quality evaluation requires a combination of evaluation know-how and ET. The gap identified in this research is the application of ET to community development projects. Introducing ET techniques into the development and implementation of SLP programmes could potentially increase their sustainability.

The concept of evaluative thinking (ET) has become increasingly popular in the evaluative space and in the training of evaluative capacity building (Buckley et al., 2015). ET uses various elements to arrive at the problem-solving stage. A detailed ET approach involves a combination of critical, creative, inferential, and practical thinking (Patton 2018). When the various elements of evaluative thinking are combined, ensuring that evaluation principles are applied becomes critical, as ET applications yield high-quality evaluations. The concept of ET is multidisciplinary and is used in a variety of sectors, as defined by the Brunner Foundation (2014), as quoted by Vo et al (2018:31), ET is;

> *"A type of evaluation that uses evaluation skills in areas other than programs and initiatives, such as human resources, technology, and fund development. It is an approach that fully integrates systematic questioning, data collection, analysis and action into an organisation's work practices."*

ET is broadly defined to encompass various methods by Vo et al (2018) as

> *"The ability to creatively arrive at evaluation-specific solutions by determining what combinations of methods, tools, techniques and theories are appropriate in light of contextual particulars..."*

In the context of ET application to a developmental NGO, Buckley et al (2015) define it as

> *"Critical thinking applied in the context of evaluation, motivated by an attitude of inquisitiveness critical thinking applied in the context of evaluation, motivated by an attitude of inquisitiveness and a belief in the value of evidence, that involves identifying assumptions, posing thoughtful questions, pursuing deeper understanding through reflection and perspective taking, and informing decisions in preparation for action."*

The definition encompasses the aspects to consider when applying the ET approach to developmental projects. This involves understanding and planning how to approach projects before, during, and after implementation, thereby ensuring sustainability (Lu et al., 2019). This definition is adopted by Vo et al. (2018) and Lu et al. (2019) in their studies on ET in development

NGOs. The definition of ET adapts when applied to different subjects and contexts. However, the fundamental concept remains the same: the ability to use a critical thinking approach to arrive at sustainable solutions using available information and resources, while considering social context. For this study, ET is a practice that stakeholders involved in SLP community development projects must adopt throughout the conceptualisation, implementation, and post-implementation phases. This will ensure that projects achieve the intended outcomes. The research borrows the definition from Buckley et al. (2015) and adds the creation of sustainable projects.

The sustainability of projects is linked to the application of ET. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) describes ideal sustainable development as a combination of economic, social, and environmental aspects in a community that functions in balance over generations. Sustainability is "the continuation of benefits from a development intervention after completing major development assistance. The probability of continued long-term benefits. The resilience to risk of the net benefit flows over time" (OECD, 2019:12). The definition implies a deliberate, thoughtful and intentional approach to sustainability. The study explores the extent to which STLM and mining companies apply this approach in SLP projects.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the rich mineral resources, mining towns in Mpumalanga, such as those in STLM, are characterised by slow economic development, are highly dependent on mining activities and continue to face socio-economic ills (Burton et al., 2019; Marais et al., 2022). SLPs were introduced as a legislative requirement to ensure that mines contribute to the municipality's development and reduce negative social impacts at mine closure. However, some SLP-funded projects continue to experience sustainability challenges, particularly once financial and technical support from mining companies ceases (Marais et al., 2022; Khumalo et al., 2024). This challenge is compounded by the global transition away from coal, placing pressure on coal-reliant economies such as South Africa’s Mpumalanga province to ensure sustainable local economic development post-mining (Cole, 2024; Khumalo et al., 2022). Without proactive strategies rooted

in ET, the risk of socio-economic decline and the so-called “ghost-town phenomenon” remains pronounced.

The legislative and developmental frameworks guiding the SLPs are comprehensive; however, ET is overlooked in the planning, which limits the sustainability of projects. Mining companies and municipalities’ approach to SLP projects focuses on compliance and project delivery—outputs—rather than long-term outcomes (Matlala, 2025). When conducted, evaluations are often retrospective and procedural, lacking the evaluative thinking and application that enable creative, evidence-based solutions. ET requires constant critical and creative thinking, reflection, and evidence-based decision-making (Vo et al., 2018; Cole, 2023), an aspect that remains underutilised in South Africa’s local government sector (Matlala, 2025). Without the application of the ET processes throughout the lifecycle of community development projects (from conceptualisation to post-implementation), municipalities and mine houses lack the chance to create more sustainable projects. The focus on project outputs rather than outcomes neglects the project's resilience and sustainability. The lack of an evaluative culture creates a void in accountability and sustainability, hindering continuous learning and improvement in the projects implemented.

This study seeks to explore how ET can be applied to SLP community development projects, moving from an output-driven model to an outcomes-based, sustainable approach. By examining how key stakeholders, such as mining houses, municipalities, and regulatory bodies, engage in project selection and evaluation, the research will highlight instances where ET can be used to create lasting impact beyond mine closure.

1.3 Research Purpose

This study explores if and how ET strategies in development planning can mitigate the prospect of ghost town syndrome in STLM. It will explore how evaluative thinking can influence the sustainability of development projects, moving from an output-based to an outcome-based approach, thereby alleviating socio-economic decline after the mining economy.

The study will explore the following:

- To what extent does the STLM apply the evaluation principles in the planning, execution, and post-implementation stages of local economic development projects in the region?
- To assess the extent to which stakeholder participation in the decision-making process in the selection of local economic development projects is practised.
- It will explore the sustainability of projects after mine closure to prevent ghost towns resulting from economic activity decline.

1.4 Research Question

The main research questions to guide the research direction are as follows:

- What factors are considered when prioritising LED projects?
- How do mine houses and the local municipality determine the sustainability of projects post-mine closure?
- How are the success and impact of completed projects determined, and to what extent is mine closure considered?

1.5 Structure of the thesis

Given the mining setting, this study will shed light on the steps required to implement practical community projects and the extent to which ET is used. The legal framework of the mining industry and its link to community development are examined in Chapter 2. It also discusses the socio-economic context that influenced the creation of this framework. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the theoretical frameworks relevant to this research: ET, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and stakeholder theory. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach used in this study. Qualitative research and key informant interviews were used to gather data. Chapter 4 presents the research findings based on respondents' feedback, while Chapter 5 discusses the findings and their implications. In Chapter 6, recommendations and best practices are given based on the study results.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will review scholarly and policy literature on SLPs, ET, and sustainable LED in the context of South Africa's mining sector. It explores the historical and legislative frameworks governing SLPs, the underpinnings of evaluative thinking, and sustainable mine-community development. The chapter also examines international examples of what has worked and what has not in post-mining decline. The review is organised thematically to align with the study's objectives and to provide a coherent analytical foundation for the research.

2.2 Legislation and policy context mandating corporate social responsibility in the South African mining industry

The South African government has implemented comprehensive legislation to address the mining industry and the complex issue of mining closures, including measures to reduce the socio-economic impact on vulnerable mining communities. The legislation outlines the roles and responsibilities of mining companies to the communities in which they operate. The discussion of relevant mining legislative instruments has been included to provide context for the research study's purpose and its importance to the South African mining industry. The legal framework which regulates the mining industry consists of the South African Constitution adopted in 1996, the MPRDA, and the Broad-Based Socio-Economic Empowerment Charter for the Mining and Minerals Industry (Mining Charter).

The South African Constitution aims to improve the quality of life for its previously disadvantaged citizens by laying a foundation for socio-economic rights (Heywood, 2021). This includes communities close to mining sites and affected by mining operations. The constitution recognises that, by its very nature, the mining industry can cause harm to human health and safety and damage the environment if permanently unregulated.

The MPRDA of 2002 regulates South Africa's minerals and petroleum resources and is a significant piece of legislation that places all minerals under the state's custodianship. It builds on the Constitution's foundation by ensuring that historically disadvantaged populations gain equitable access to mining. In the Act, the state commits to ensuring sustainable mineral resource development that sustains health, safety, environmental preservation, alongside economic and social progress. The six main objectives of the Act are to: a) establish the recognition of the state as the primary custodian of all minerals, b) ensure that historically disadvantaged black people also have access to mining resources, c) promote economic growth through increased investment and employment opportunities, d) facilitate mineral and prospecting rights for easier regulation, e) maintain ecological sustainability of mineral resources, and f) require rights holders to contribute to socio-economic development in their operating communities (MPRDA, 2002; Rogerson, 2011). The Mining Charter spells out the operational aspect of how communities are uplifted.

The Mining Charter is the operationalisation aspect of the MPRDA. It introduces measurable targets across six elements: ownership, employment equity, human resources development, procurement, supplier enterprise development, living conditions, and mining community development. The Charter was explicitly created to address the industry's previous racial imbalances and to promote greater participation by formerly disadvantaged communities in the country's mineral wealth (Plagerson et al, 2024).

In the Mining Charter, CSR is a legislative tool introduced to ensure that all mining companies contribute to the socio-economic development of communities. This strategic legislation should not be seen as an isolated legal event but as a deliberate, calculated response to historical injustices, socio-economic inequalities, and the need to build sustainable mining communities in accordance with the country's constitution. The Mining Charter specifies measurable targets for socio-economic contributions through the SLP. The SLP plays a crucial role in ensuring that mining companies contribute to the upliftment of the communities in their area of operation. Regulation 46 of the MPRDA provides guidelines on the SLP, and mining companies must take its provisions into account when developing and implementing their CSR strategy and policies. The role of the DMRE is to ensure that mining houses comply with the requirement to give back to and develop

the communities in which they extract minerals. The mining community development section of the SLP embeds requirements for the mines to contribute to the community's Local Economic Development (LED). The study focuses on the mine community development (also known as LED) section of the SLP. By focusing on LED and fostering collaboration between municipalities and companies, the legislation aims to ensure that mining activities deliver tangible benefits to communities (Sinyongwana et al, 2019).

The connection between the South African Constitution, the MPRDA, and the Mining Charter presents a comprehensive approach to mining regulation, particularly in the spheres of community development and CSR. Collectively, they address the historical injustices while promoting community development and participation in the mining economy.

2.3 CSR and government duty in South Africa's mining sector

Mining companies are mandated to invest in community development initiatives through SLPs to maintain their licence to operate. However, through taxes paid to the state, the government remains responsible for providing services and developing infrastructure (Khubana, 2022; Serfontein-Jordaan et al, 2022). While addressing priority community needs through SLPs, mining companies also help fill gaps left by under-resourced municipal governments (Khumalo et al., 2022). This creates tension as the lines between mining houses' responsibilities and the government's become blurred. Mines seem to take on the role of government, building schools, clinics, roads, and providing water infrastructure. This poses a risk because mining-led projects are undertaken for compliance and may lack a long-term sustainability plan achievable through coordinated state planning, especially at mine closure (Serfontein-Jordaan et al, 2022). Marais et al. (2021) argue that, given the negative operational impacts on the environment and surrounding communities, mining companies must give back through community upliftment projects. On the other hand, there is an argument that the state risks failing to deliver on its responsibilities to the people, and reliance on mining companies further exacerbates governance challenges. In this regard, local governments must align with corporate efforts and be at the forefront in steering the city's development (Pieterse, 2022).

2.3.1 *Steve Tshwete Local Municipality (STLM) socio-economic background*

This section highlights STLM'S socio-economic background and areas for further development. The coal mining sector is the most thriving, indicating an overreliance on a single sector. In Mpumalanga province, STLM is located within the Nkangala District Municipality. Mining and manufacturing are cited as major economic activities in the municipality. Coal mining accounts for 45.8% of the local municipality's GDP, while manufacturing is next at 17% (Letsema, 2021). Other contributing industries include trade and agriculture. However, the province has excellent growth potential. Nkangala District contributes 13.7% to Mpumalanga's GDP and ranks third in the province (STLM IDP, 2021). Manufacturing, mining, tourism, energy and agriculture are the main economic drivers in the region. Notably, tourism is growing exponentially and has strong potential to continue growing. The municipality plans to develop national and regional road infrastructure and construct a new hotel and conference facilities to support the growth of the tourism sector. In addition, the region's proximity to the iconic Kruger National Park is a tremendous competitive advantage for the municipal district that could bolster tourism growth, even after the mining boom.

The municipality's socio-economic status is measured by unemployment, poverty, and inequality levels. Due to mining activities, which act as a pull factor, the municipality records high annual population growth. From 2007 to 2016, the population increased by 9,7% compared to the 4.4% increase from 2001-2007 (STLM IDP, 2021). The increased population has strained infrastructure resources and raised unemployment and poverty levels. The average household income has declined by R575, which is below the poverty datum line. This has a ripple effect which includes increased social ills like petty crime, increased drug use and unplanned pregnancies among the youth, incidences of malnutrition in children and adults, among others.

Education levels improved in 2019, with 64% of the population having completed matriculation, and more than 36% having completed some primary schooling or none (STLM IDP, 2021). The municipality's unemployment rate in 2019 was 18.8%, compared to 29.1% in the province. More

unemployed youth were female than male in 2019, at 23% (STLM IDP, 2021). With the transition from coal to cleaner energy and the closure of coal mines, massive job losses are expected (Khumalo et al., 2022), worsening the province's economic situation. The situation highlights several areas where mining companies could contribute to development through their CSR programs.

2.3.2 *Projects sponsored by the mines*

Mining houses generally sponsor projects based on what lDP and local communities propose as priorities at any given time. These may include infrastructure such as roads, housing, and the renovation and extension of schools, community centres, and clinics. Others may be skills development initiatives such as small business development, early childhood development and workplace skills for youth and women (STLM IDP, 2021). The planning and implementation of these projects require the application of ET techniques to ensure effective resource deployment and future sustainability.

The Mining Charter specifies that the mine's compliance budget is spent on projects identified in consultation with stakeholders, such as municipalities, communities, and government departments. Most projects are identified by municipalities in the LED section, and fewer by communities. The STLM IDP (2021-2022) shows that most projects sponsored by mine houses in the LED section of the SLP are classified as infrastructure development projects. Projects from eight coal mines in the municipality have been listed, and the majority are related to the construction of various infrastructure, including clinics, low-cost housing, industrial warehouses, a bakery, a school renovation, and a school hall (STLM 1DP: 2021-2022). In addition, two mining houses have included youth skills development and bursaries as part of their commitment. Another two have included income-generating projects such as sewing, agricultural gardening and a bakery. However, the bulk of the LED portion is allocated to infrastructure projects.

With increasing pressure to provide services, the IDP lists various needs—water, sanitation, electricity, waste removal, and stormwater drainage —as priority projects within the municipality

(STLM 1DP: 2021-2022). Some infrastructure is dilapidated and needs upgrading, which creates competition for funding. Due to age, water pipes continually burst, resulting in the installation of new piping. In addition, population growth has necessitated the installation of transformers with higher voltage capacity; hence, electrical provision and water are the municipality's top priority projects (STLM 1DP: 2021-2022).

2.4 International and national mine closure effects and the ghost town phenomenon

The mining sector has historically been the driver of economic activity in South Africa for over a century, contributing 6.2% to the South African GDP from 2019 to 2020 (Stats SA, 2024). In addition, the gold mining sector has attracted vast numbers of migrant workers to Gauteng province, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, among others. The country's economic growth created a reciprocal demand for electrical energy. The energy demand was met by developing coal-fired thermal power stations in coal-rich provinces such as Mpumalanga and Limpopo (Burton et al., 2019). As a result, the coal mining industry flourished due to the increased demand for electrical energy. The national power utility, Eskom, wisely chose to locate its power stations as close to the coal mines as possible for logistical efficiency.

Thermal power stations then attracted large numbers of migrant workers seeking employment, leading to the development and growth of mining towns. Towns in Mpumalanga and Limpopo rely on coal mining and thermal power stations to drive economic activity (Burton et al., 2019). However, the future outlook for the coal mining sector and thermal power stations is becoming increasingly uncertain as Eskom struggles to keep the lights on due to ageing, unreliable infrastructure at its power stations. This has the potential to create a 'ghost town phenomenon'.

In mining towns, mine closures result in decreased economic activity, reduced vital services, and increased poverty levels (Bainton et al., 2018). In addition, the city becomes depopulated when the economic activity that supported it ceases. People leave the town or city in search of new employment opportunities as companies close down. They further argue that "poorly managed

closure processes exacerbate these impacts and can damage the corporate reputation, where operators are held responsible for the social mess they have left behind" (p.45). Syahrir et al. (2021) agree with the finding as shown in their studies of Singkep Island in Indonesia and Blyvooruitzicht Village in Gauteng, discussed above. Campbell et al. (2017) studied the impact of mining booms and busts in Witbank. They argue that “over and above the unpredictability of the mining resource roller coaster – that of closure – looms over all mining communities, one which many communities tend to ignore and are thus ill-prepared for when it occurs” (Campbell et al. 2017, p. 224). The case of Witbank is a vivid example of how poor spatial planning and a lack of ET can result in the economic decline of a once-thriving mining city.

In the examples of mining projects above, we see various instances of mines closing and the consequences of closure, including the formation of ghost towns. Sayahir et al. (2021) give examples of Singkep Island, Indonesia and Blyvooruitzicht Village in Gauteng. Findings show that Blyvooruitzicht Village was too dependent on the mine, such that, with its closure, infrastructure was not maintained, economic activity declined as there was no alternative economy to replace mining, and unemployment levels increased. Siyongwana et al. (2019) share a recent example of Pilgrims Rest. Similar to Blyvooruitzicht Village, the effects of mine closure became apparent through a lack of infrastructure maintenance, emigration, social ills such as crime and substance abuse, and limited economic activities. The extent to which ET is applied in community development projects at conception, implementation and post-implementation to reduce the likelihood of ghost town syndrome occurring in the Steve Tshwete municipality.

Globally, mining regions have grappled with the socio-economic consequences of mine closures, including the ‘ghost town’ phenomenon. In the Appalachian region of the United States, efforts to transition away from coal dependency included diversifying the economy through tourism, renewable energy, small business development, and technology (Seung-hun et al., 2021). A federal programme was initiated to provide training in entrepreneurship, technology, and other skills that enable and empower former mine employees to pursue economic diversification in their respective regions. The government funded efforts to diversify the economy.

Cynon Valley in Wales, economically dependent on coal mining, became a ghost town after mine closures in the 1930s. Post-mine closure, the community relies on tourism as a key economic driver. Most recently, the residents have come together to build and support a social enterprise approach to economic development. Locals have pledged to improve their economy through the establishment of various small businesses, which are thriving, though at a small scale (Bevan report, 2023). Although this approach has been successful, there are still socio-economic effects of mine closure, such as unemployment and slow development.

In New Brunswick, Canada, the success story of a transition from mining dependency to alternative economies is linked to a mine-closure plan already in place. Syahrir et al (2021) noted that the government readily stepped in to steer development by introducing and funding alternative economies in tourism, arts and culture, and food production. This success in transition can also be attributed to the fact that it occurred in a developed country with readily accessible funding, as well as to the mine's short life span.

International experiences highlight that successful transitions typically require strong governance, early planning, genuine stakeholder engagement, and investment in diverse economic development long before mine closure. After reviewing mining closure strategies, O'Keefe (2024) found that a combination of approaches is necessary to mitigate the social effects of mine closure, given the area's context. South Africa's mine closure strategies should consider that different approaches were used in the above examples, and learn from these lessons, recognising that there is no 'one size fits all' approach. Strategies for this complex issue must be tailored to suit the contexts of different areas.

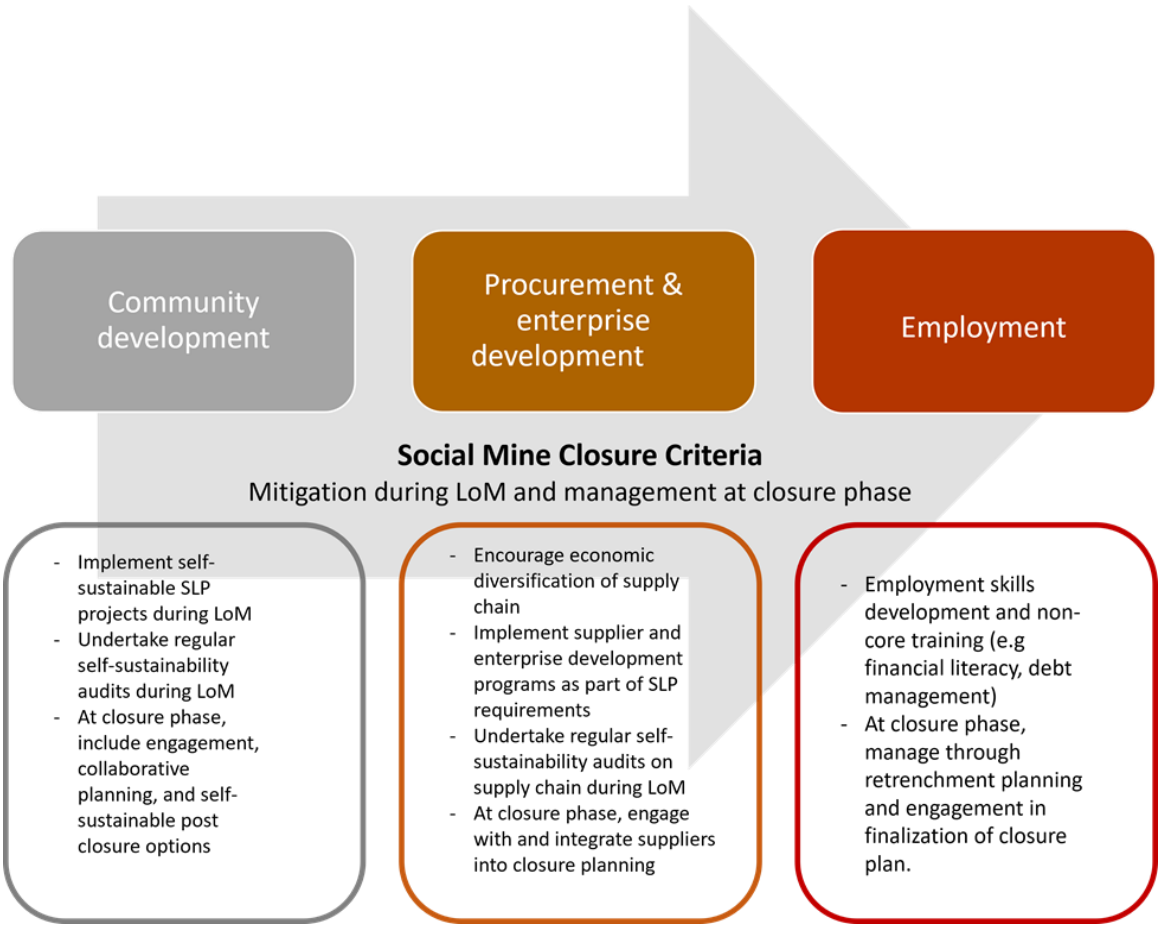
2.4.1 *Mine closure strategy in South Africa*

In acknowledgement of the likely negative effects such as environmental degradation, reduced economic activity, and social ills arising from mine closure, the DMRE gazetted the National Mine Closure Strategy (2020). In recognition of the detailed environmental mine closure plan in the MPRDA, this strategy focuses on cushioning the economic, environmental, and social impacts during and after mine closure. Identified social impacts include health, safety, employment and

labour management. To avoid the negative social impacts of mine closure, suggestions include encouraging economic diversification and leveraging existing mines so the economy is not disrupted in the event of closure (DMRE, 2020). Sectors such as tourism, agriculture, manufacturing and energy are to be boosted to function concurrently with mining activity. This requires mines in the region to collaborate on their SLPs to grow the economy and to consider post-mine closure in their social upliftment projects. When these are addressed alongside environmental factors, the negative impacts of mine closure will be reduced (DMRE, 2020).

In a research paper conducted on behalf of Anglo American, Heymann et al. (2016) concluded that a mine closure without concurrently planning for its impacts leaves a gap in the mine closure planning process. They propagate the idea that for a community to fully recover from the social and economic impacts of mine closure and establish new economies would take many years. Edwards et al. (2022) suggest planning for mine closure years before closure, as illustrated in the diagram below. They outline the critical stages of developing and implementing a social mine closure plan that ensures sustainability and reduces negative social impacts when mines close. This tallies with the National Mine Closure Strategy (2020), which advocates for planning for mine closure long before the life of mine comes to an end.

Figure 2: Social mine closure criteria during LOM and mine closure phase



Source: adapted from Edwards et al (2022)

The social plan for mine closure begins while the mine is at its peak production. The plan narrows down to three social areas where mining companies must focus. Ensuring that SLP projects will be self-sustainable even after mine closure, capacity building for small businesses and skills training should be an on-going process while the mine is in operation (Edwards et al., 2022). Early planning, collaboration with various stakeholders, economic diversification, and skills development for local communities, as suggested by Edwards et al. (2022), align with the strategies adopted globally, which have resulted in success stories after mine closure (O'Keefe, 2024; Seung-hun et al., 2021; Bevan report, 2023).

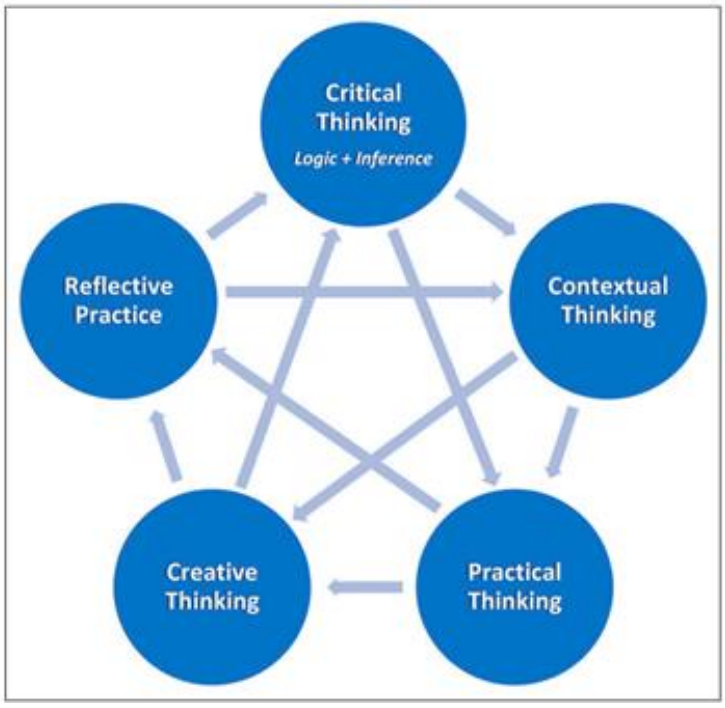
2.5 Theoretical Framework

This subsection explains the theories which informed the conceptualisation of this research and how they apply to the study. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and stakeholder theory are the frameworks relevant to this research.

2.5.1 Evaluative Thinking

A detailed ET process, when applied to an evaluation, involves a combination of critical, creative, inferential, and practical thinking (Patton 2018). Cole (2023) takes this further and includes contextual and reflective thinking in the mix. An evaluator must apply this combination, shedding light on angles that might otherwise be overlooked. He further emphasises that ET must precede evaluative planning and implementation. Cole (2023) cites De Bono (1969), who provided insights into the concept of ET by highlighting five elements for achieving a holistic approach to a problem (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Evaluative thinking components



Source: (Cole, 2023 as cited in De Bono, 2010)

The five elements are contextual thinking, creative thinking, reflective Practice, practical al., (2018).

- Contextual thinking involves integrating multiple perspectives to gain a better understanding of the problem. Linking the evaluation process to the research and relevant theory is central to solving the problem.
- Practical thinking involves combining theory and Practice when evaluating a project or concept. This includes integrating input from non-professionals and ensuring that conclusions are presented for straightforward interpretation.
- Creative thinking is a way to enhance creativity in assessing a problem through exploring different questions and ideas. This may involve inviting multiple perspectives and interpretations from stakeholders. Creative thinking may also involve redefining and reconceptualising a problem, seeking varied valuations and interpretations (Cole, 2023; Patton, 2018).
- Reflective practice is the ability to understand how one's personal experience, as well as others', can profoundly influence our assessment and attitudes towards evaluating a project. Cole (2023) states that our unique experiences, interests, theoretical understandings, socio-economic status, education, age, ethnicity, and gender, among others, may affect our judgment of a particular problem. Reflective thinking involves objectively assessing how our personal biases and attitudes impact our perspective of the problem.

When the various elements of evaluative thinking are combined, evaluation principles become critical and must be applied. Stakeholders involved can use these as more detailed guidelines for conceptualisation and project planning. Detailing the principles helps project evaluators ensure that all aspects of the project are considered before, during, and after the implementation phase (Cole, 2023).

Cole (2023) makes a compelling argument by emphasising the importance of holding continuous ET workshops with all stakeholders and decision-makers to sharpen their skills and knowledge. This includes assumptions in identification and examination, and the exploration of the primary elements of ET; critical, creative, contextual, practical thinking, and reflective Practice. Archibald et al. (2016) took this a step further by conducting training workshops on ET for community development stakeholders over two years. After the capacity-building workshops, improvements were observed in the community projects applied under the study. This was a result of applying ET and theory-of-change concepts introduced during project planning for stakeholders.

Without these skills development initiatives and a clearly defined policy on ET as a planning tool, there will not be a significant improvement in community projects. Lu et al. (2019) found that barriers to ET practice include a lack of funding and overburdened staff, which apply to this research. It must be compulsory for all decision-makers and planners to undergo ET training workshops before they are placed in such positions. Compulsory ET training and development is beneficial in that:

- it could significantly reduce instances of fruitless expenditure in municipalities.
- Mining houses would not be required to fund infrastructure projects that are the responsibility of local government, and the LED projects implemented by mining companies would receive more funding, thereby increasing the likelihood of project success and a lasting impact on communities (Lu et al., 2019).

Archibald et al. (2016) advocate for the capacity-building of community project practitioners through training in ET applicable to everyday situations. The daily practice of incorporating ET will ensure that practitioners critically apply their actions and strategies, resulting in more effective and successful outcomes. By combining practical tools, concepts, and theoretical frameworks over time, practitioners were well equipped to apply ET practices, resulting in sustainable projects.

A significant factor in the success of the capacity-building workshops was the training of all stakeholders, from grassroots to management levels. The study involved training community

volunteers at the grassroots level to identify projects to undertake and the dynamics involved, as well as development practitioners and management within the organisation. This approach would work well in the mining sector when choosing and implementing community development projects within the SLP. Singh et al. (2018) found that companies' half-hearted, philanthropic approach to CSR projects results in a lack of commitment to project sustainability, as the focus is on inputs and media image. In agreement with Archibald et al. (2016), they advocate training and capacity-building in monitoring and evaluation frameworks for CSR. The approach must involve senior management and practitioners to have a balance between the top-down and bottom-up approaches.

2.5.2 Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

In legislating community development, the Mining Charter ties mining houses to comply with the corporate social responsibility (CSR) standards. The OECD (2001:13) defines CSR as a "company's contribution to sustainable development." However, there is a recognition that the company's meaning would differ based on its strategic focus. This may include economic, environmental, and social development, with an emphasis on sustainability for future generations. Serfontein-Jordaan et al. (2022:3) quote the definition of CSR from the World Business Council for Sustainable Development as "the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as the local community and society at large."

In South Africa, the mining charter has regulated CSR contributions by mine houses because of social ills stemming from the legacy of apartheid. As a result, mining companies are compelled to include community development in their business strategies and to uplift communities in the areas where they operate (Serfontein-Jordaan et al., 2022). In addition, increasing pressure on the mine houses from surrounding communities has compelled the companies to give back, in an effort to uplift the community and build good relations. The key to the success of CSR projects is the involvement of local communities and other stakeholders in identifying and planning for

developmental needs. This ensures stakeholder buy-in, which is important to the project's sustainability after completion. Given this, there is a debate on the impact of CSR initiatives and their sustainability in communities. Research on the sustainability of mine projects in the community has been inconclusive (Serfontein-Jordaan et al., 2019). Several approaches to measuring the social impact of projects are suggested by Singh et al. (2018). This includes;

- Companies need to make a firm decision to measure the outcomes and impacts of projects instead of focusing on inputs and activities.
- The best approach is to measure projects at the level of social impact, as this would reflect the project's effectiveness.
- Lastly, to test for impact levels, a control group can be used, and the difference between the two groups assessed to reflect impact.

In this context, the researcher examines how project evaluation is addressed in the LED projects.

Decision-makers can also establish an ET framework to select appropriate projects and critically evaluate their sustainability at all stages, from conception through implementation to post-implementation. Archibald et al. (2016) suggest that it is necessary to capacitate development practitioners with evaluative skills. Thus, among the stakeholders who decide which projects to choose, it is essential to involve all stakeholders while maintaining a balance of competent stakeholders who do not hold ulterior motives or alliances.

CSR is a business model in which organisations self-regulate; it sees the enhancement of society and the environment as crucial to business. Four factors drive CSR: environmental, ethical, philanthropic and economic. Organisations must seek to positively enhance their effects across all four factors for CSR to be successful (Serfontein-Jordaan et al., 2019). The organisation must self-mandate to be ethical in all business practices, to give back profits to the community or to charity, and to enhance the economic welfare of internal and external stakeholders. CSR projects follow a format: they begin with a clear plan communicated to all relevant stakeholders. Afterwards, internal and external stakeholders, including the community, are notified and allowed to provide input. CSR also includes a life-cycle analysis that supports monitoring and evaluation, providing room for improvement (Serfontein-Jordaan et al., 2019).

2.5.3 Stakeholder theory

According to McCance (2024), quoting Freeman (1983), one of the early proponents of the stakeholder theory, the stakeholder approach is based on the premise that businesses must not only prioritise the financial interests of shareholders and investors at the expense of other interested parties. Freeman argued that a company's success depends on its ability to balance shareholders' interests with the needs and expectations of other stakeholders, particularly workers and the host community. Tshabalala (2020), citing Adonteng-Kissi (2017:196) observes that companies are realising that without the support and cooperation of the local communities in which they operate, their future existence in those communities is likely to be cut short.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed legislation relevant to the research. The MPRD Act of 2002 regulates the country's mineral resources and was introduced to address past racial injustices and to transform the mining industry. Linked to the Act is the Mining Charter, which encourages the correction of historical injustices by outlining equitable ownership, employment equity, human resource development, and mine community development, and highlights targets for each in the SLPs. Mining companies are mandated to comply with the Act, thereby highlighting the importance of businesses uplifting the communities in which they operate through CSR programs. To ensure effective socio-economic development, the engagement and involvement of relevant stakeholders in SLP elements are vital. The theoretical framework shows that applying ET is pivotal to ensuring long-term project sustainability in combination with CSR and stakeholder engagement.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

In Chapter 1, the research examined how ET is used to select community development projects in the SLP, how communities are involved, and what sustainability plans are in place to reduce dependence on the mining economy. This chapter discusses the methodology used to gain insight into the research purpose. A qualitative approach was used to explore the experiences and perceptions of key decision-makers involved in community SLP projects. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. By using this method, the research aimed to obtain rich, in-depth data that captured respondents' experiences in community development projects.

3.2 Research design

A qualitative approach was deemed suitable for this study, as it allows for the exploration of the complex meanings and interpretations that participants assign to a phenomenon within a given context (Hennink et al., 2020). Qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews, help reveal the complex and individual meanings that stakeholders ascribe to their decisions and behaviours (Korstjens et al, 2018).

STLM was chosen as a case study because it has a high concentration of coal mines and, therefore, a high number of SLP projects have been implemented in the area. This setting provides an information-rich context, making it an ideal area to investigate the dynamics of ET in selecting and sustainability planning for community development projects. The diversity of stakeholders involved in community development projects allows for multiple perspectives to explore the challenges of sustainability (Hennink et al., 2020).

This context allows the research to address the essential questions of ‘how’ and ‘why’ in the study. Questions asked, such as “How do the stakeholders assess the sustainability of projects

after mine closure" or "why certain projects are prioritised over others during the selection phase", provided further insight into the ET process undertaken.

3.3 Research paradigm

The study is rooted in the interpretivist paradigm which forms the basis for qualitative research. The basis for this paradigm is that reality is inherently subjective, as individuals assign meanings to their actions and experiences within their social and cultural contexts (Korstjens et al, 2021). This research study aims to achieve this through questioning to ascertain an appropriate theoretical framework for investigating the social dynamics underpinning the implementation of SLP-related community development initiatives. The study is designed to reveal how different stakeholders perceive the impact of development initiatives within the STLM on their living standards and quality of life. The data collected from the respondents were sorted into appropriate themes, after which analysis and interpretation were conducted.

3.4 Sampling

This study employed purposive sampling to identify participants with direct experience and expertise in SLP-related decision-making within the STLM. This sampling method is non-random and deliberately selects participants based on their qualities and expertise in the sector (Stratton, 2024). Purposive sampling is valuable for in-depth exploration of a phenomenon and provides rich contextual data (Korstjens et al, 2021). The research participants were key informants who had a say in selecting the LED projects to be implemented and could provide rich data from their experiences.

3.4.1 Description of research respondents

Respondents included local government authority figures, community development practitioners, and communities involved in the LED sector. These respondents have input into the selection of development projects, and some have decision-making and implementation

powers. They also possess in-depth knowledge through their work experience and position. The study targets these respondents primarily because they fully understand the importance of stakeholder participation in community development projects in the SLP. Additionally, they have a stake in the success of these service delivery and local economic development initiatives. The selection of participants' criteria included people who:

- Were directly involved in SLP project planning, consultation, or implementation within the last three years
- Could articulate detailed insights into SLP mine community development processes
- We are willing to participate in a recorded, in-depth interview.
- Represented at least one of the three key stakeholder categories (municipality, corporate, or community).

This approach ensured that only knowledgeable, relevant participants were included, thereby promoting trustworthiness and data richness (Stratton, 2024; Korstjen et al, 2021). All selected respondents are key players in the consultation, selection, decision-making and implementation of community development projects. As shown in Table 1, all respondents had more than three years of exposure in the community development space, particularly in LED. Most respondents are stakeholders across various development sectors and contribute to community projects in the LED.

Table 1: Summary of research respondents

Respondent Number	Occupation/Experience	Key Responsibilities
1	LED working group member, Director of construction company, PR manager for business forums (6 years)	Supports local business development, facilitates stakeholder engagement, and advises on LED strategies
2	LED working group member, Community leader (4 years)	Represents businesses in the LED working group, ensures mining company accountability, and proposes LED projects
3	Community practitioner from a mining company (8 years)	Identifies and implements community development projects, engages with stakeholders
4	Mayoral committee member, Local governance expert (10+ years)	Oversees municipal projects, chairs multiple committees, and coordinates infrastructure projects
5	Ward councillor (17 years)	Represents peri-urban and rural communities in the municipality, prioritises developmental issues
6	Ward councillor and Municipality official (20+ years)	Senior municipal official and ward councillor, advocates for community development
7	Government official, Regulator of SLP compliance, Mining license adjudicator	Regulates SLP compliance, monitors mining company reports and implementation plans
8	Municipality official, Strategist (12 years)	Develops municipal strategies and focuses on leadership, business, and governance.

9	Municipality official, SME Development expert (9 years, 20+ years in SME development)	Supports SME development, has expertise in economic planning and project management
10	Mine practitioner, Social development practitioner (10 years)	Leads social development projects for mining houses, liaises with municipalities and regulators

3.5 Research method

Key informant interviews are the primary data collection method for respondents in the research study. In-depth interviews are conducted with key informants, selected for their first-hand knowledge and expertise on a topic of interest (Patton, 2015). The respondents can provide detailed insights into the root causes of problems and articulate strategies for future trends. Therefore, it is essential to identify the right respondents to obtain rich data.

Kumar (2018) summarises the following advantages and disadvantages of key informant interviews as follows:

- Information comes directly from knowledgeable people, so they provide data and insights that other methods cannot obtain
- Key informant interviews provide flexibility to explore new ideas and issues that were not anticipated at the study's design stage but are relevant for the purpose.
- They are very cost-effective.

Respondents must be carefully selected to reduce bias when the researcher is unfamiliar with local conditions. In this case, informants may be selected based on their expertise in the sector. For this study, experts such as LED or IDP managers have been identified as key informants and would provide rich information as they work in the industry. Issues of bias and reliability are discussed in the later sections. All interviews will be conducted face-to-face.

3.6 Research tools and data collection

To ensure flexibility in probing participants, semi-structured interviews were used for data collection; this also ensured that questions remained aligned with the objectives of the study. Using semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions allowed the researcher to elicit participants' reasoning and interpretations regarding the application of ET in community development projects within the SLPs (Guest et al., 2020). The interview guide consisted of twelve questions, which were structured around the research questions:

- What factors are considered when prioritising LED projects?
- How do mine houses and the local municipality determine the sustainability of projects post-mine closure?
- How are the success and impact of completed projects determined, and to what extent is mine closure considered?

To ensure alignment with the questions, the guide was divided into thematic areas: i. project prioritisation and decision-making, ii. sustainability and long-term planning, iii. evaluation and impact measurement. Each theme included open-ended questions and probes to elicit factual, reflective, and interpretive responses. For example, participants were asked: 'Can you describe how your organisation decides which projects to prioritise, and what evidence or criteria guide those choices?' Such questions encouraged participants to reflect and discuss their experiences, assumptions, and values, which are core elements of ET (Cole, 2023). Interview questions were drafted to avoid leading participants (Jowsey et al, 2021). Thus, the questions served as a guideline, allowing participants to share data in the way they understood.

After editing, the guide was piloted with two professionals with experience in SLP project implementation who were not part of the main study to check for ambiguity and improve clarity. As a result of the feedback, some technical terms were rephrased, reducing redundancy and improving conversational flow. The revised guide was reviewed by two academic peers to ensure relevance, validity and conceptual clarity (Hennink et al., 2020).

An interview guide was used to collect data, and during interviews, the researcher used a recording device to capture raw data, which was later downloaded to a desktop computer for

safekeeping and transcription. Data collected virtually on Teams was recorded and transcribed through the software's recording and transcription functions. This was transferred to the computer for storage, safekeeping and use at the coding and analysis stages.

Respondents were contacted by telephone or email to request their participation in the study. For more information about the study, the researcher shared participant information sheets and consent forms. Six interviews were conducted face-to-face, and the remaining interviews were conducted virtually via Teams. All respondents gave their permission to record the interviews. As indicated in the consent form, the researcher reiterated to participants that their input would remain anonymous for this research. Participants were given full disclosure of the risk of identification, given their easily identifiable positions, especially those in public office. This was necessary to maintain the participants' trust in the study.

3.7 Positionality and reflexivity

The researcher is employed as a community development practitioner in the mining sector. The position offered unique access and insights but also the risk of introducing bias and power imbalances, particularly among municipal and corporate participants (Brinkmann & Jacobsen, 2021). To avoid bias, the researcher took the following steps:

- Maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study, documenting assumptions, interactions, and perceived power dynamics.
- She was transparent to the participants about her professional background and the study's academic aims, mitigating potential confusion or perceived conflicts of interest.
- Avoided leading questions and maintained a neutral, non-judgmental stance to foster open dialogue.
- Conducted a debriefing session with a peer academic to review interpretations for unconscious bias.

The researcher deliberately included respondents from various stakeholder groups to get multiple perspectives and mitigate bias in the research process. This reflexive practice acknowledges the influence of the researcher's background and power relations on qualitative inquiry and actively works to ensure ethical and trustworthy engagement (Jowsey et al, 2021).

Reliability and validity give credibility to research and help evaluate the authenticity of the study. The study's reliability was assessed by piloting the interview guide, which involved testing and administering the questionnaire to a few respondents. An assessment of the results followed this phase to verify if they were consistent with the aims and objectives outlined in the study (Middleton, 2019). Peer review briefing was used as an additional method to ensure the reliability of the research. In his study, Beletto (2018) and two independent researchers used this approach to support reliability checks and to identify instances of bias. The researcher followed the suggestion, working with academic peers to assess for bias.

3.8 Data analysis

The data were analysed using the six-phase thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (Ahmed et al., 2025). This approach is suitable for identifying patterns of meaning within qualitative data while maintaining flexibility and depth. The process unfolded as follows:

1. Familiarisation: Transcripts were read multiple times to gain an overall understanding of the data. This allowed the researcher to notice emerging patterns in the data.
2. Generating Initial Codes: Significant phrases and ideas were labelled with descriptive codes.
3. Searching for Themes: Related codes were grouped to form preliminary themes reflecting aspects of ET. These formed sub-themes under the main research questions.
4. Reviewing Themes: Themes were refined to ensure coherence and accurate representation of the dataset to ensure accurate representation.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Each theme was clearly defined and supported with illustrative quotes.

6. Producing the Report: The final themes were interpreted in relation to the research questions and existing literature in the analysis chapter (Ahmed et al. 2025).

3.9 Ethical considerations

Ethics in research are crucial for any study that seeks to obtain data from people. Certain principles that guide research designs and the code of ethics have to be followed during data collection (Bhandari, 2021). Since the researcher collected the data directly from people, obtaining the institution's permission was an essential requirement. Bhandari (2021) emphasises that researchers must ensure that the aim and design of the research comply with the institution's code of conduct and meet the ethics requirements. The research proposal was submitted to the institution's academic authorities for approval. Etikan et al. (2016) emphasise that the researcher must also ensure that respondents are willing and available to participate in the study. In addition, the researcher must choose respondents who can articulate their opinions reflectively. Respondents want assurance that the information they provide to the researcher will remain confidential and not be disclosed to third parties or authorities. A confidentiality guarantee significantly affects the quality of collected data, as respondents are less likely to hold back their responses. The informed consent form required study participants to agree that their data would be used for academic research and would not be shared with third parties. Although anonymity was guaranteed, respondents were made aware that it might be possible to recognise some due to the nature of their work and the data collected.

Sanjari et al. (2014) assert that qualitative research may establish a level of intimacy between the research and participants. Therefore, confidentiality declarations play a crucial role in protecting both parties. They also state that researchers should consider the potential impact on respondents and vice versa (such as disturbing emotional reactions). To preserve anonymity, opinions were not attributed to specific individuals but to a number. Interviews were recorded with the consent of the informants, and the recordings were transcribed for analysis

3.10 Limitations of the study

The study focused on local economic development projects and their sustainability post-mine closure. Other factors which could contribute to a ghost-town phenomenon after mine closure have not been discussed. Some mine closure risks may be environmental, such as land and water pollution and a lack of land rehabilitation. Mining closures also contribute to the loss of essential services and infrastructure for health, education, and transport. In brief, the study did not delve into the following areas:

- Environmental effects after mine closure, such as water pollution and unaddressed environmental issues, might also contribute to a ghost town syndrome. It focuses purely on LED projects and does not cover other aspects.
- This study is limited to STLM; other municipalities within the district or at the national level are not considered. The study cannot be expanded to other areas, as it focused on a single municipality and used a small sample.

3.11 Conclusion

The study will contribute to the current knowledge of applying evaluative thinking in planning community development projects. This knowledge-based approach will improve mining companies' resource use and enable more sustainable CSR initiatives. The data collection methods will provide comprehensive insights into the extent of ET in mine community development projects in the SLP.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the research findings, which aim to explore the application of evaluative thinking in the process of planning and execution of community development projects. The chapter begins with an overview of the SLP process in the STLM.

4.2 Institutional framework for SLPs in the Steve Tshwete Local Municipality

The STLM conducts a public participation process in line with the Municipal Systems Act (2000) to identify developmental needs, which are added to the IDP. This plan serves as a guide by the mine houses to identify priority developments that could be included in the SLP. The coal mining sector is a dominant economic player in the municipality; hence, the LED Strategy maps plans to diversify the economy into areas such as tourism, agriculture, enterprise development, and skills development. IDP/LED meetings are held annually, during which mine houses, government sectors, and the community meet to discuss the municipality's developmental progress. These update meetings bring a variety of stakeholders under one roof to discuss progress, priority needs, and areas for collaboration within the municipality. In the study, respondents reported attending these meetings and having knowledge of the proceedings in the municipality.

4.3 Findings

Findings came from the experiences and perspectives of key informants with diverse backgrounds. Similar questions were asked, though some were slightly altered to suit their specific context. However, certain themes consistently emerged from the interviews. Thus, thematic analysis is used to organise the data. The themes and emerging sub-themes will be discussed in detail, together with the relevant verbatim quotes to support the findings. Where there are significant differences in responses, they will be addressed, including their implications. Themes were arranged as follows:

Theme one: Factors considered in prioritising LED projects:

- Consultation process
- Prioritisation of projects

Theme two: sustainability/project challenges

- Maintenance of the project after implementation
- Handover to the municipality,
- Training of project beneficiaries,
- Quality control

Theme three: project impacts

- Negative impacts
- Positive impacts
- Mine closure consideration - alternative economies - mines will not close (LED group)

4.4 Factors considered in prioritisation of LED projects

This section explores the determinants of projects that are a priority and likely to be funded by mining houses. Although the respondents' responses varied, a common element was the importance of including the community's needs by involving them in determining which projects to include. A second factor was the importance of infrastructure projects.

4.4.1 Consultation process for mining companies

A thorough consultation process is followed by the mine houses to involve various stakeholders in understanding and prioritising their developmental projects. The importance of community consultation is further emphasised by the fact that when mining companies submit their SLPs to the DMRE, they must;

> *"...show that there has been a thorough consultation process with the communities and that these are the projects agreed on with the community, so the mines must find a way of balancing the community's needs with those of the municipality"* (Respondent 7).

In line with the MPRDA guidelines for meaningful consultations, mine houses are obligated to consult with various stakeholders, such as municipal authorities, traditional leaders, and local communities.

> *"I consult the municipality, which is the LED manager, or the community leaders, who are the ward councillors and their committee members, who are key members of the community and then the community in general, because sometimes you find that in Steve Tshwete Local Municipality, specifically, there are communities that have grouped themselves with different structures. So, you find that there are some business structures, people who group themselves and are only interested in SME programs, and there are those who are interested in employment. So, I would find them also and have them all in a meeting to discuss the various needs…."* (Respondent 3.)

The respondent, a mine practitioner, highlights the complexity of stakeholder engagement in the Steve Tshwete Local Municipality, where communities have organised themselves into different interest-based groups. The aim is to ensure inclusivity and responsiveness in project planning, enabling mining houses to design initiatives that reflect the diverse economic and social priorities of affected communities. This bottom-up consultation approach fosters local ownership of development projects and enhances their long-term sustainability. However, the effectiveness of these engagements depends on how well identified needs are translated into actionable projects with adequate funding and strategic implementation. A notice on public platforms such as local or regional radio stations, local newspapers, and municipal notice boards, inviting all to participate. The majority rule will be used to consider which projects are funded. In this process, the community decides which projects are shortlisted.

4.4.2 Municipal consultation process

The public consultation process followed by the mine houses differs slightly from that of the municipality. The municipality's public participation process follows the guidelines stipulated in the Municipal Systems Act of 2000 for the IDP consultation process. The IDP represents the community's wishes; hence, community projects are modelled to align with the IDP and reflect those wishes, achieved through public participation consultations held by the municipality. The Municipal Systems Act (2000), encourages community participation in the developmental affairs of the municipality. A strong focus is placed on community involvement in the preparation of the IDP, performance management, and the monitoring and evaluation of outcomes and successes. Consulting and involving communities in the development of the municipality instils a sense of ownership and belonging among citizens when their voices are heard. It reduces the gap between grassroots and municipal authorities by incorporating the community's lived experiences into planning (Gava, 2025). Transparency and accountability, through feedback and the publicisation of documents for information sharing, ensure that communities are up to date on the municipality's performance management. This is crucial to the municipality's growth and helps reduce instances of top-down development and service-delivery protests.

> "*After every election, we prepare an IDP for the next five years. The community helps us identify needs."* (Respondent 5).

> *"A project must represent the needs of the community. You cannot do a project without the community. Ward councillors conduct public participation sessions with the community, and they find out the needs, and different wards share their needs. These are then taken to the IDP. The projects are separated between capital needs and operational needs, where projects which require capital injection are added to the IDP. We don't go back to the community for more projects, we use the IDP and identify five key priority projects per ward and each year of the IDP, we will focus on a different project in that ward and identify which ones are important in the community" (Respondent 4).*

The municipality follows the IDP approach to public participation, ensuring that various steps are followed before a project is included in the IDP document.

> *There is a process for notifying the public and determining their needs. The ward councillors notify members of their wards. The constituencies are notified next, and public participation is done to ensure that the community's needs are identified* (Respondent 4).

A municipal member explained the process by which the projects submitted are sorted according to priority and how funding for those projects is determined:

> *"We do a consultation when compiling the IDP so each ward gathers and identifies all their priorities and, we list them as identified by the affected community and capture them in the IDP and present them. Anything identified in the document is a priority. (...) When we allocate a budget we also allocate to whoever comes in from the private or government sector. Companies fund projects that we cannot. We have a weighing scale to determine the projects we cut. Our priority now is the long list, and in cases of shortfall, we request assistance from private businesses. Companies fund whatever we share as projects that are remaining and are not funded internally. Currently, our priority in the municipality is water and electricity. But, priorities are competing in every instance because housing is also a priority, so we have to weigh the most important and see who will come in to partner in those competing priorities." (Respondent 9).*

4.4.3 Community-led consultation processes

Community forums use a different approach to make their voices heard in the development planning process, particularly when advocating for projects to be included in SLPs. They act as

intermediaries between residents, local businesses, and decision-makers. These forums serve as platforms where community members can voice grievances, submit proposals, and request project sponsorships from mining houses. One of the leaders explained how they influence projects to go into the SLP,

> *"We note complaints from the community who are part of our membership, and also the proposals that they give to us requesting a project sponsorship. When our members come to our offices to complain or report issues about service delivery, we take the majority of the complaints and those are the ones that we submit to the mines, even the ward councillors come to us to complain about services." (*Respondent 2).

As explained by Respondent 2, community forums gather complaints and proposals from their members and prioritise those that reflect the most pressing concerns. The most frequently reported issues are then escalated to mining houses, influencing which projects are considered for funding under the SLP framework. The community identifies their needs as problems, which are ascertained to be either private-sector problems or public-sector problems and are captured accordingly (Respondent 8). This approach demonstrates how community-led structures actively participate in local development planning, ensuring that their concerns are represented in discussions with both municipal officials and mining houses.

4.4.4 Prioritisation of projects

The IDP technical meeting is then conducted with the mine houses, relevant sector departments and other stakeholders. Those who can help solve the identified problems collaborate with the relevant stakeholders in the sectors. Infrastructure projects are mainly focused on benefits that last and on social and economic infrastructure that unlock the community's economic potential (Respondent 9). The municipality official stated that although the community raises needs, the needs most likely to be funded align with sustainability and enhance economic well-being.

"At the IDP technical meeting, we invite all the mines, all the sector departments, the businesses to attend. …we present our priorities to them. They will then identify projects in the areas where they operate and how they can assist in the problems that have been identified by the community. We ask the ward councillors to give us their five key priority needs. That for us is important because if three of the five are addressed, that's two that stay behind, and somebody needs to service those two." (Respondent 8).

It also emerged from the interviews that the officials are concerned with honouring the community's needs and complying with the DMRE's requirements for proof of the input gathered from the community, through letters of endorsement from ward councillors and district leaders, and public participation minutes. The representative also states the criteria for the needs to be appeased through infrastructure that alleviates poverty in the mining area whilst still supporting the IDP of the local municipality.

"*In most cases, the projects that we approve are ones that we know are more sustainable, and they have the potential to create employment. These are the projects that immediately meet our criteria. So, we're looking at job creation, and we're looking at infrastructure and related projects. We are looking at projects that will benefit most of the communities as opposed to one project, like an SME project that will benefit maybe a few people. But if you look at infrastructure, for example, a water-linked project, you know that the whole community will benefit from that specific project, and we would not hesitate to approve that kind of project"* (Respondent 7).

This was reiterated by a municipal official who shared that priority projects are infrastructure-related.

"We mainly focus on infrastructure projects because they have a long-term impact. We also ask our stakeholders to assist us to unlock economic potential, so the focus will always be infrastructure projects" (Respondent 9).

The departmental representative also elaborated on balancing community needs and the municipality's IDP. There is also a preference for projects that create employment and benefit the community rather than individuals.

Most respondents highlighted that the most essential factor in choosing a project is community consultation. They emphasised the importance of involving community members in decision-making on issues directly impacting their livelihoods. Stakeholder meetings for mine houses and public participation in municipalities served as platforms for community consultation. Community structures made their voices heard by giving suggestions at the mine stakeholder meetings or the LED working group forum. This ensured transparency and accountability in the decision-making process. In addition, it ensures the project meets the community's actual needs and priorities.

While community input plays a crucial role in shaping development priorities, not all community needs are realised due to various constraints, including budget limitations and project feasibility considerations:

"*It is input from the community. So, we leave it to them to say this is priority number one, two, three, four and five. But it doesn't necessarily mean that it will culminate into a physical project. It depends on the budget and the money available for that specific financial year*" (Respondent 6).

As Respondent 6 explained, although community members identify and rank their top priorities, the process does not guarantee that all proposed projects will be implemented. The final decision

depends on the available budget within a given financial year, highlighting the resource constraints that municipalities and mining houses face in allocating funds for SLP projects. Another respondent reiterated this, showing how they reached a consensus on prioritising projects,

> *"Needs that were raised by the whole community and were common to all, that is, if the majority of the people agreed to that need, then it would fall into the SLP and then the other projects that maybe have less support or not so much support would go into." (Respondent 3).*

Ultimately, the realisation of community development projects depends on a balance between community aspirations, financial viability, and strategic planning. This underscores the importance of evaluative thinking in project selection, as it ensures that limited resources are allocated efficiently while still addressing the most pressing and widely recognised community needs.

4.5 Perceptions of project sustainability

This section presents findings on the sustainability of projects once they become operational and cease receiving funding from the mines. This is a critical step in project decision-making to maintain sustainability after the mine intervention. The respondents had varying ideas about what would ensure a project's lifelong success after implementation. Ideas included ensuring that a budget is available for maintenance and handing over to the municipality or government department for upkeep. In the case of community projects, it meant ensuring that the relevant beneficiaries were selected. Key people in the sector emphasised strategic planning for the project's success.

4.5.1 Project maintenance and budgeting

More than half of the respondents advocated for a solid maintenance plan that would result in a successful project with a handover to the municipality, with the assumption that the municipality will take over the project and look after it,

"When you sign an agreement with the municipality, you already know that you have put in your maintenance plan meaning the municipality will maintain the project. Then definitely if you put in your maintenance plan then it falls within the operational budget, automatically you already sustain that project. For example, we are doing that for the gravel roads that a mine tarred. In the operational budget, we added the maintenance budget of patching potholes, replacing caps, and clearing the storm water drainage. That falls within planning - you plan properly, you do an operational thing, then that project is sustained. We are no longer relying on the mine" (Respondent 4).

Using an example of mine-funded road infrastructure, Respondent 4 above highlights how the operational budget includes provisions for patching potholes, replacing road caps, and maintaining stormwater drainage systems. This proactive approach prevents reliance on the mine for long-term upkeep, instead shifting responsibility to the municipal planning framework. However, while this method formalises project sustainability, its success depends on the municipality's capacity and financial stability, raising concerns that all projects handed over will receive the necessary resources and oversight for continued functionality.

Another respondent resonated with the idea that if the project is handed over to the municipality or government department, it is that entity's responsibility to maintain it. A budget plan is put in place for the maintenance when it does kick in;

"We look at future funding. If a mine assists with a project, we look at future maintenance of the project. We put down a three-year plan to say from this point going forward, then we will need the maintenance plan to kick in.....but from the scoping and specifications of a project, we know what will be sustainable, what material is used, how it's used and how the infrastructure is constructed and how much will it require for us to maintain it at the same level for a particular duration. So those are the things we take into consideration when determining the sustainability of the project. We don't have to do a project for the sake of doing them, but we ensure quality. Is part of the content of that project …. All projects are the responsibility of the municipality. If we have mechanisms for handling the

project if the unexpected happens. For example, we would go back to our budgeting process, and the other option is to see if other private sector companies finish the project. If everything fails, we will go back to option one" (Respondent 9).

As Respondent 9 explains, sustainability planning involves developing a three-year roadmap that outlines when and how the maintenance phase will begin. This proactive approach ensures that projects are not just implemented and left to deteriorate but are built with longevity in mind.

4.5.2 Identification of suitable beneficiaries

The community must be empowered through education, training, and experience to continue operating these projects after the mines exit. Thus, one of the respondents cited training and capacity-building for community beneficiaries as a main issue for ensuring project sustainability. The community must have sufficient training and capability to take over a project. As important as having competent beneficiaries and stakeholders when the project begins, it is equally important to have a similar level of competency in the human resources that operate projects after mines close. There are aspects of projects that are technical, mechanical, manual, and intellectual; hence, the beneficiaries must have the appropriate skill set.

"After completion, the mine is not involved, the community that takes over completely, is now the community that takes ownership of the project, but remember before then they would have undergone training to ensure management of the facility" (Respondent 3).

However, this view was not considered favourable to the sustainability of community projects. Five respondents strongly emphasised the need to identify suitable beneficiaries who are passionate about the project and will ensure its success even during the most difficult times.

"People with first-hand information recruited their friends etc with no passion which led to project failure … If it is a community project, the reason they fail is the choosing of beneficiaries. We don't check people who are passionate, for example, a hydroponics project was started by one of the mines. They requested people with a Matric certificate

to apply to run it. these people after five months, when they get a job from the mines they go. But consider that those people were taken to training and equipped with skills to run the project and they are leaving. We must go deep in choosing the suitable beneficiaries, for example, if wanting to do a poultry farming project, go into the community and you will find a woman who has a small chicken business, then you can formalise her and give her the necessary skills. You can combine those people who are passionate" (Respondent 4).

The beneficiaries' lack of experience was cited as a negative outcome, and the need to locate beneficiaries who are passionate about projects and capable was expressed. A combination of both is essential in ensuring sustainability. A lack of passion and capability will result in incompetence on the project. Hence, it is vital to make the right placements when allocating jobs, tasks, and duties for a project. This will ensure success and sustainability.

"The outcome is not going to be a positive one. It needs someone who's got a passion for the whole programme. Someone who's been in the agricultural space for some time, a person who understands how soil is, what type of plants must be planted and when. So, imagine if you pick someone from the street who doesn't understand and place a cabbage plant when they are supposed to put a potato plant, that won't work" (Respondent 7*).*

4.5.3 Introducing alternative economies

Municipalities should consider diversifying their economic base to mitigate the risks of relying on a single sector, which could lead to the creation of ghost towns. Numerous examples of ghost towns resulted from over-reliance on mining; hence, the municipality's strategy takes this into account.

"If you look at our newly approved Local Economic Development Strategy. It does speak to the economic risk we're facing, and that risk is a heavy reliance on the mining sector. It is the leading industry in our local economy, and we're taking a cue from other towns like

Welkom, Sterlfontein, Kimberly, and others that are today ghost towns because they heavily relied on mining. Once mining was gone, there were no alternative economic activities, so the strategy speaks of diversification. How, then, do we utilise the advantages and the spin-offs from the mining sector to create and develop other industries? (Respondent 9).

Economic diversity is key in ensuring that the municipality does not rely solely on mining activities. Johannesburg, which underwent the same mining-closure scenario, has maintained its relevance nationally and globally as an investment hub, even as other industries have become prominent after the gold mines closed.

If you look at Johannesburg in 1886, over 100 years ago, it was a small gold mining town. Today, it is the biggest investment hub of the continent, but we find no mining activities happening in the heart of the city, simply because they created other industries that benefited from mining and developed those to be sustainable manufacturing sectors, like Euro Lane Automotive in Pretoria, etc. We are now developing an investor attraction strategy that will speak directly to this issue. How we attract investors to these other underdeveloped areas is by packaging opportunities that we will present to them and say come and invest because these are the situations, the benefits, and the advantages of coming here. So the overall message is that we are diversifying our local economy with a view of broadening the local scope of economic activities and stimulating other sectors like agriculture, agro-processing, tourism, manufacturing, etcetera" (Respondent 9).

Quality control during implementation is essential to a project's success. In addition, working with an experienced team adds to the project's sustainability. As projects are implemented, there must be quality and expertise to ensure a high-quality product is delivered to the community. This will ensure the product/project lasts for a long time, as it will be of high quality in materials, planning, implementation, construction, and maintenance. If all the components of community projects are of high quality, then the outcome of the entire project will be of high quality, thus, ensuring the sustainability of the project;

> *"From the scoping and specifications of a project, we know what will be sustainable, whatever material is used, how it is used, how the infrastructure is constructed, and how much it will require for us to maintain it. So those are the things we take into consideration when we determine the sustainability of the project. We don't have to do a project for the sake of doing them, but we ensure quality is part of the content of that project."* (Respondent 8).

A memorandum of agreement is signed between the mines and municipality as a commitment to implement the project. On completion, the project is handed over to the municipality or relevant body. This ensures that the project's continuity is officially recognised, states Respondent 10. The municipality has the financial and technical ability to maintain and even expand projects; hence, handing over to the municipality ensures the project continues to function and is maintained.

> *"At the mine, we sign a Memorandum of Agreement with the municipality to ensure that the project is handed over to them on completion. this will ensure that the project continues to impact as they will look after it"* (Respondent 10).

The mine practitioner considers handing over to the municipality a key factor in ensuring the project's sustainability. Three respondents agreed with this point, indicating that,

> "*When the mine hands over the project to us, we then ask for the whole set of documentation that talks to the asset of the mine. This means we take the asset up on our municipal books, we take the asset up as ours because it's been handed over and there is a certificate, which allows us to identify the asset as ours. Now we have a building and maintenance plan that relates that all assets need to be maintained and taken care of. The minute we take up the asset as ours then the policy of council then applies like any other assets that we have as a municipality" (Respondent 8).*

This structured approach to project handover and municipal integration demonstrates an effort to institutionalise sustainability. However, the effectiveness of this approach depends on whether municipalities have the necessary financial and technical capacity to maintain these assets over time.

4.6 Determination of project success and impact

This section will present the respondents' perspectives on the project's impact on the community after implementation. It is also a way to view how respondents evaluate the overall success of the projects in achieving their intended goals. The respondents had mixed feelings when asked about the impact of the community projects implemented by the mine houses. Some reported negative impacts, citing various reasons, while most respondents gave a favourable report. Their responses help us determine whether they believe the projects have made a positive difference in the community. In discussions with the respondents, their perspectives could be grouped into negative and positive impacts of the projects.

4.6.1 Negative impacts

When maintenance issues and other factors compromise the longevity of completed projects, negative socio-economic impacts result. It is apparent that, for a project to last longer and be successful, security factors must be incorporated into the planning stage. This factor links with ensuring that a maintenance plan is in place for the project to run after implementation.

> *"I have got three big parks in my ward and those things (solar lights) were installed, then immediately vandalism occurred. At Athlone Dam, they put some solar panels (where) you go there and charge your cell phone, those lasted about a week and a half" (Respondent 5).*

Frustration at the lack of planning to maintain community projects was rife, and complaints were raised that the municipality requested the LED projects but failed to make provisions for their upkeep.

> *"It was given; you never had this; you requested it from this company. The moment your community requested for this, all you need to do is maintain it, and that be given funds, from the treasury, which they can use to maintain those*" (Respondent 7).

This sentiment was echoed by an official who said the council's budget for maintaining existing projects is at times lower than the required amount. This can lead to delays in necessary maintenance and repairs. Without proper maintenance, infrastructure and projects can deteriorate quickly, leading to costly repairs in the future. The lack of funding for maintenance can trigger a domino effect of problems, ultimately impacting the community as a whole. Local governments must prioritise and adequately fund maintenance to ensure the longevity and functionality of public projects and infrastructure.

> *"One concern that we have in local government, the norm is that about 8% of your budget must be spent on maintenance of existing infrastructure and, unfortunately, ours in the last budget if I remember correctly, was only 5%" (Respondent 5).*

Lack of maintenance planning is a key cause of project failure. Adequate planning for project maintenance is essential, or failure will result. Unsuitable and inexperienced beneficiaries will result in financial waste, as much of the budget can be spent on fruitless projects (Respondent 7).

> "*Once the company exited the project and left the beneficiaries with the relevant department, it still did not make it through. If you come to Mpumalanga there was a big project that was run by (….) in the Steve Tshwete Local Municipality, (…) It was a bakery project and supported for the longest time. But the moment the mine exited the project. Guess what happened, it never saw the light of day, the project was unsustainable. It collapsed. Money was spent on those projects. So, there are a number of those kinds of projects: agriculture, bakery, brickmaking. The list is endless"* (Respondent 7).

There is a perception that projects handed over to the municipality are bound to succeed, as they are the municipality's responsibility.

> *"All projects are the municipality's responsibility. We have mechanisms for handling projects if the unexpected happens. For example, we would go back to our budgeting*

process, and the other option is to see if other private sector companies will finish the project. If all fails, we go back to option one" (Respondent 9).

The municipality's continuous and conspicuous involvement at all stages of development seems to inspire confidence among affected communities, as this respondent noted.

4.6.2 Positive Impacts

Despite the negative impacts, the mine's community development projects have positive effects. These were prominent in infrastructure development, education, and employment. One positive impact is that mining houses actively contribute to education through bursaries and skills training. These contributions enable youth and adults to pursue education through funding from the mining houses. Education is fundamental to personal and community development, as it equips individuals with the skills to be employable.

"For example, the bursary programs that the mines have. They've sustained and transformed quite a lot of lives in terms of funding. A child who would maybe rely on NFSAs or is just not able to attain bursary funds is helped tremendously by that. The mine's education programs transform a lot of lives." (Respondent 3).

Another positive contribution is that mines are a source of hope and prosperity for the community, as they bring employment opportunities. One of the most common reasons for this positive sentiment was increased job opportunities and financial stability for municipal residents.

"Many people are employed in the mines, Middelburg, eMalahleni, Ogies, Belfast towns, we are all focusing on mining for our livelihood, and we will be seriously affected if the mines close. We are planning to go to the government offices to protest against the closure of coal mines and power stations" (Respondent 1).

Employment was also a key positive impact of mines and the projects they fund within the communities. Mining houses do not only contribute to employment directly by employing

individuals at the mines. They also contribute to employment through the projects that they fund. Clinics, schools and recreational parks employ members of the community. The construction of infrastructure, such as roads and workshops, also employs local communities. This point shows the extent of mining's spin-offs on the local economy.

> *"According to the record I'm talking about under correction, they were in the region of more than 250 sub-contractors who worked on a daily basis at Komati Power Station. They were the ones that were fixing the wires, installed the globes because it's a power station, and also supplied the paper, and supplied this and that." (Respondent 8, 2023).*

As indicated, mines bring diverse employment opportunities, whether direct or indirect. One of the infrastructure projects in the municipality allows for a diverse employment activity, which is the workshops and warehouses built by the mine houses to be utilised by local businesses:

> *"A few mines that helped us with phase one of the Node D project where a few workshops and warehouses were built, is one of the success stories is there are small businesses who have rented some of the workshops and are doing well and have employed people to work for them, one is fixing furniture, and there is a guy that doing car repairs*" (Respondent 9, 2023).

A key impact is that the mines' infrastructure projects have a long-lasting effect. These range from school buildings and houses for residential purposes to clinics, tarring gravel roads, and water provision through borehole drilling and installation. As discussed in the factors of determining which projects to fund, infrastructure projects are prioritised as they benefit the entire community and are long-term investments. Some of the positive stories shared by respondents were the following:

> *"There are many positive stories, we have put up schools and upgraded schools to ensure that kids have access to better education, built clinics in Kwazamokuhle. Boreholes have been dug; the road infrastructure has been greatly improved. Mining companies have assisted a great deal in the development. I want to highlight the clinic built in Sikhululiwe,*

which has assisted a great deal, otherwise the community would have travelled more than 40km to the nearest healthcare centre" (Respondent 9).

Assistance to schools includes improving facility quality to create a conducive learning environment for children. This includes school facilities programs, additional classes for overcrowded schools, or school renovations.

"Kitchen projects in schools have a big impact. At Mkhulu Combined School , they used to cook outside for the children even in the rain and also in the dust, now I think they appreciate that there is now a kitchen that they can cook in" (Respondent 1).

Income-generating projects are successful when the most appropriate beneficiaries are identified to run them.

"There is a bakery in a section of Mhluzi which was built and funded by the mine and run by a disabled guy. It was doing so well, but unfortunately, he passed away. I was impressed by seeing a person with his disability doing that work, waking up early every day, at 7 o'clock, the business, managing employees, producing good quality confectionery, and multitasking in a wheelchair. He was very successful and opened a branch in Tokologo" (Respondent 2).

The provision of houses has contributed to reduced housing backlogs within the municipality.

"There was a mine that was built beautifully, with beautiful family houses, for the communities." (Respondent 3).

"Projects such as schools, infrastructure, water, and roads are the best. Built houses, water provision, and hall construction; those are functioning very well. Projects handed over to the community seem to fare better than those handed to the municipality, as the community wants to protect those. Where there is 24-hour security, the projects fare better as vandalism is reduced" (Respondent 7).

The most prominent assessment from respondents is that infrastructure projects are generally preferred and appreciated by beneficiary communities. These communities are more inclined to accept and take ownership of completed projects and to ensure they are protected from vandalism and disrepair. Projects that are completed and handed over to the local municipality rather than the community tend to fare worse. This implies that community participation in decision-making processes regarding development projects is crucial. The community tends to take responsibility and better care of such projects. By implication, the local municipality is not as diligent in managing the post-completion phase of projects, which is characterised by poor maintenance programs and inadequate protection against vandalism.

4.6.3 Mine closure considerations

Introducing alternative economies is a key factor in considering mine closure. This implies that communities surrounding mines should not rely solely on mining and related activities for economic sustenance. Tourism and agriculture are other possible alternative economies that can provide economic diversity and stability. This will ensure that other economic activities in the event of mine closure, cushion the potential negative financial impact. Diversification will offer communities alternative means to generate income and remain economically active.

> *"One finds reduced mining activity affects economies all over the world unless otherwise you've got other secondary economies within that particular area that would actually hamper the impact in those municipalities. But if you look at the Steve Tshwete Local Municipality, for instance, I think there are two dominant economies in that area: mining and agriculture. So, if one were to die, obviously, the other would not be able to cater for the whole of Steve Tshwete Local Municipality. So, the creation of other economies is what is needed. But the government should look in terms of planning, bring in other economies while the mines are still there so that they can invest in those economies just to buffer up on the economic front"* (Respondent 7).

The closure of mines has a devastating impact on the socioeconomic well-being of the people living in the area. This is generally in the form of reduced income-generating activities, which directly affect people's livelihoods and the municipality's functioning.

> *"There will be a huge impact on the municipality if mines close. If we just look at Optimum Mine, which closed, people lost their jobs. We had to give a special rebate for those people at some stage. Optimum Mine also purified water and provided that to a large portion of our residents. So, they had to build a huge pipeline to accommodate water loss. Job creation and income-wise, our community will be affected after mines close. The mines play big roles in our community"* (Respondent 6).

The devastating impacts were observed when one of the municipality's power stations was shut down. People had to travel longer distances to other workplaces; contractors and others who made a living through knock-on effects were also affected.

> *"Recall people didn't use transport to go to work; they walked to work. That's how close they were; there were a lot of opportunities. Imagine that Komati made us believe there will not be any job losses from the current staff members. What they will do is retrain , reskill, and also redeploy their staff members to other power stations or other facilities that talk to Eskom, but they never told us what's going to happen with the subcontractors. According to the record, I'm talking under correction, they were in the region of more than 250 subcontractors that worked on a daily basis at Komati. People who went there were the ones who fixed the wires, the ones who installed the globes because it's a power station. Also, the ones that supplied the paper, the ones that supplied this and that, but when they did these services to redeploy, they never told us what we were going to do with these people. Are we also going to move them along with these activities? It never happened. If you go to the area, they sit at home now without any opportunities. You know when we talk to traders for instance, those people don't even go on-site. They will be close to the gate. Selling a plate of food, peanuts or something like that, but those people made money, and now they are no longer there" (Respondent 8).*

Growing alternative economies to reduce over-reliance on mining is one of the best ways to cushion the negative impacts of mine closure. STLM could enhance alternative sectors such as tourism and agriculture, supporting small local businesses,

> "*Small businesses will not survive when mines close because they rely too much on the mines. So, they must have alternative businesses which do not rely on the mines. Those of us who are tendering with the mines will be most affected and once they shut we will have problems, we will lose our cars and our homes. I am pushing my forum members to look into the manufacturing sector as well instead of relying on the mining industry only"* (Respondent 2).

The issue of small businesses relying on mines for their survival is a concern. Small businesses need to be equipped with survival skills through mentorship programs and business training.

> *Mines need to develop people to become businessmen. I foresee a danger where small business people jump into the field, but they do it for the money, not knowledge of the business. There is no monitoring of the small business; when the mine pulls out, the danger is that we are relying on the big mining houses to grow our young businesses and local manufacturing companies. We need to have a link between those infrastructures built by the mine.... Financial lessons are needed for those who are in business, and small businesses must be incubated to grow the township economy"* (Respondent 2).

Supporting small businesses must be strategic, ensuring they are not reliant on the mine and can diversify so they do not overly rely on it.

> *"We have a small business in our organisation, and we assisted one guy with a truck to get a job in the mines. I facilitated that he gets a job with the local mine. Now, after one year and 6 months, he has about ten trucks. …if maize is close, he can transport maize or sand with his trucks, he will not go hungry"* (Respondent 1).

4.6.4 *Monitoring of projects after implementation*

To determine the extent of post-implementation project monitoring and to define success and continuation to meet expected outcomes, respondents had varying opinions.

> *"As a municipality, we don't have a full-blown monitoring and evaluation department that signs off contractors. Not at this moment, we are heading there. but within the memorandum of understanding that we have, all the tenders that we have that we put outside, we build in a monitoring tool for all the departments to sign off activities within a project. This means up to a stage where we can keep a completion certificate, a monitoring and evaluation test would have been done consistently during the processing"* (Respondent 8).

During the planning and implementation phase, a shared vision of the project's outcomes is determined by all involved. When this process is followed, it ensures a high-quality, successful end product.

> *"To determine if the project has achieved its outcomes, pre-project implementation, we would have mapped out the output expectations and impacts that the project has to achieve. During implementation, we have criteria that we tick along the way to see we are meeting objectives"* (Respondent 9).

Post-implementation and handover to the Department of Health, project monitoring showed some positive results on the operational front. In one of the clinics, a thorough process is followed to monitor the effectiveness of the use of the clinic. Although there is no mention of building maintenance, the fact that the clinic is providing services to people who had no access to nearby health care is more important.

> *"On the clinic side, we check people who are collecting treatment for hypertension, we check people who are collecting treatment for HIV, and so forth. Since 2021, I think it's been two years now since it was built, and a lot of patients have visited the clinic. I'm talking about people with chronic illnesses; I'm talking about HIV. About 1,300 people are visiting the clinic every month to collect treatment. Results show that many people are*

accessing the clinic, thus showing that there is a need for health services in the area. Also, the services offered by the clinic have increased, which means that it is thriving……We check the report, the monthly report, and the annual report. We have experience doing that - mass check, mass headcount, 2021 to 2023, July, and we found that 28,000 people have utilised the facility. Ask yourself, 28,000, especially where this facility did not exist, where were they going before to access healthcare" (Respondent 4).

Overall, respondents agreed that mine houses mostly performed well in community development projects. The positive effects outweigh the negative; this was coupled with a sense of dread that the mines might close and the devastating effects it would have on the communities and the municipality.

4.7 Conclusion

The central point that emerged in this chapter is the need to make deliberate, purposeful attempts to foster a new culture of adopting evidence-based decision-making through the ET approach. Stakeholder consultation and participation in decision-making and planning processes are crucial to the sustainability of development projects. A prominent issue is that when different stakeholders take ownership of a development project, they ensure it succeeds and does not become obsolete or succumb to vandalism. The development of skills and training programmes among the various stakeholders is also a recurring theme. Findings show that there is no deliberate application of ET practices, although some aspects are applied. The application of ET skills will contribute to successful SLP projects that function long-term, even amid the threat of mine closures.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the main points from the findings and links to the literature reviewed in the previous chapters. In determining priority projects, the findings underscore the importance of engaging stakeholders and incorporating their input into decision-making. It is crucial to involve stakeholders from various backgrounds and perspectives to ensure that all voices are heard and considered. The maintenance of completed projects, the selection of appropriate beneficiaries, and the introduction of economic alternatives were identified as key issues necessary for ensuring sustainable projects after mine closure. In determining the project's impact after completion, respondents noted both positive and negative impacts, including mine closure effects and project monitoring and evaluation.

5.2. Stakeholder consultation and project prioritisation

The MPRDA amendment of 2022 includes guidelines on 'meaningful participation', including how mine houses should consult with communities. My houses are required to consult meaningfully with communities on the SLPs' LED projects to ensure that community needs are addressed and aligned with the municipality's updated IDP (MPRDA, 2020). The Guideline for Consultation with Communities and Interested and Affected Parties requires mine houses to consult with communities, traditional leaders, municipalities, landowners, lawful land occupiers, relevant government departments and any interested and affected parties (DMRE, 2020).

The research findings show that mine houses follow the prescribed guidelines, which ensure that all relevant stakeholders are informed and consulted. This approach reduces discontent with the mine, allows for their social license to operate, and ensures accountability and transparency with the communities. The research findings further show that community participation in the

selection and planning of developmental projects is essential for their success. This tallies with the Municipal Systems Act (2000), which encourages community participation in the municipality's developmental affairs. A strong focus is placed on community involvement in the preparation of the IDP, performance management, and the monitoring and evaluation of outcomes and successes. Consulting and involving communities in the development of the municipality instils a sense of ownership and belonging amongst the citizens when their voices are heard. It reduces the gap between grassroots and municipal authorities by incorporating the community's lived experiences into planning (Gava, 2025). Transparency and accountability, through feedback and publicising documents for information sharing with communities, ensure that communities are up to date on the municipality's performance management. This is crucial to the municipality's growth and helps reduce instances of top-down development and service-delivery protests. The importance of stakeholder consultation and collaboration between mining houses, municipalities and communities when developing SLP strategies results in strong project outcomes (Tshabalala, 2020). Emphasis on consultation with stakeholders, including communities, links to stakeholder theory—for mine houses—interests and expectations of stakeholders must be taken into account in developmental projects.

While public consultation guidelines are adhered to, the final selection of LED projects to be implemented is finalised with the municipality, as these must align with the priority development plans in the IDP. It is important to find a balance between community needs and the municipality service delivery obligations. Findings show that the STLM holds public participation meetings where community members are given the chance to air their needs in the IDP process. Ward councillors also submit the top five priority needs in their wards after consultations with their constituents (Respondent 5). These are incorporated into the IDP for the next five-year development planning phase

Despite the local government's efforts to incorporate people's needs, there is a sense of disconnect from the process of selecting LED projects to be supported by mine houses. Ward councillors indicated that they are not involved in the selection of final projects implemented in their wards, as this is finalised at the LED office. Some community organisations echoed this

sentiment, believing the best approach is to engage directly with the mine houses through stakeholder meetings. It is only through these engagements with the mine houses that they can influence LED projects for the SLP, not through the public participation processes. The mine houses are under pressure to deliver to both stakeholders and have to strike a balance between projects suggested in their consultation processes and those within the IDP. In their study of ethical implications, Maphisa et al. (2019) found that including all affected stakeholders in community project evaluation and related decision-making processes is ethically imperative. They indicate that stakeholders must recognise that priorities will compete, and that this is when mines must decide which projects to support.

Respondents generally concur that community participation and consultation are important in the decision-making process for new projects. Nyaranga et al. (2019) concur with this approach, stating that engaging citizens through the public participation process is the best way for the government to ensure that decisions are transparent and best suit the beneficiaries and stakeholders involved. Thus, community consultation and stakeholder engagement are the most important steps in determining which projects to implement. What we find happening in STLM with the public participation process is that it does not adhere to the guidelines stipulated in the Act. The study conducted by Serfontein-Jordaan et al. (2019) found that engaging stakeholders in decision-making on development projects contributes to sustainable projects by fostering a sense of ownership among communities.

5.3 Perceptions of project sustainability

To determine whether projects were successful, respondents raised issues of maintenance, appropriate beneficiary selection, and the exploration of alternative economies to mining. They emphasised the importance of ensuring that projects were sustainable in the long term, rather than providing only short-term benefits.

5.3.1 Project maintenance

Respondents raised several points that could enhance project longevity, including infrastructure maintenance, community training for takeover, handover to the municipality, and quality control. In addition to the lack of maintenance planning, the capacity to maintain projects was identified as a contributing factor to project failure. There is a lack of capacity within the local authority and community leadership, which profoundly affects the success or failure of the approved LED projects. A crucial aspect of the project planning process is the post-implementation stage. This requires particular attention because most service delivery projects tend to deteriorate rapidly without sustained maintenance. The major problem is the lack of funding due to inadequate maintenance budgets. Respondents noted that the failure to budget for maintenance during the planning phase was a significant factor. Mining houses can provide initial project funding, but the local municipality is responsible for keeping the project going forward. One respondent articulated that a three-year maintenance plan with a corresponding budget for each is key.

Maintaining infrastructure and establishing operational systems are crucial to ensuring the community continues to benefit from projects after the mines have closed. A lack of maintenance will result in the project ineffectiveness and ultimately a waste of resources – as seen in the findings, one of the projects was vandalised with weeks after completion because of a lack of security (Respondent 5). According to Serfontein-Jordaan's (2022) study, handing the project over to the municipality upon completion ensures its sustainability. However, those findings contrast with this research's findings, which established that the municipality has difficulty maintaining projects due to limited budgets.

5.3.2 Beneficiary selection

The notion that stakeholder buy-in and involvement result in a sense of ownership and ultimately a sustainable project (Serfontein-Jordaan et al, 2022) is debatable in this research. Respondents highlighted that selecting unsuitable beneficiaries resulted in wasted resources. As one respondent observed that 'inexperienced beneficiaries are allocated funds for projects that never see the light of day" (Respondent 7) due to a lack of business acumen and business management skills. Other beneficiaries would buy into the project and own it until an employment opportunity materialised and they left. The importance of choosing passionate beneficiaries to ensure project sustainability was one of the key findings. Community buy-in and involvement do not necessarily mean that the chosen beneficiaries have a passion for the project. However, it must be acknowledged that, in a few instances where passionate beneficiaries were involved, the projects were successful.

5.3.3 Alternative economies

Marais et al, (2021) notes that municipalities plan for diversified economies when they realise their overdependence on mining. However, the plans are not implemented and nothing is done when mine closure becomes imminent. Siyongwana's (2022) study in Graskop is a recent example of the local government's failure to spearhead and implement sustainable projects while the mine was operating at full capacity. This concurs with (Marais et al., 2019), who indicated that an overreliance on the mining economy by the local government results in a failure to act if there is no funding from the mines.

In STLM, instances where the municipality is making efforts to support projects which promote economic diversification. The municipality's economic diversification plans are being implemented, and the mines fund some. Alternative economies identified in the municipality include tourism, agriculture, manufacturing, an improved township economy, steel manufacturing, and support for SMMEs and skills development. This approach aligns with global

examples of closure and the introduction of alternative economies. The mine houses in STLM have incorporated some of these projects in their SLP programs (STLM, 2022). Contrary to Marais et al.'s (2021) findings, there is evidence of planning for alternative economies in the municipality's LED Strategy (STLM, 2022) and the Township Economic Revitalisation Strategy (STLM, 2019). The LED Strategy focuses on diversifying the economy through sectors such as tourism, agriculture, and enterprise development. The Township Economic Revitalisation Strategy seeks to support and formalise small local businesses operating in residential areas in the townships, improve working conditions, attract economic activity, and assist small businesses to grow. State of the art workshops and warehouses were constructed in a collaborative effort by the mine houses as part of their SLP commitments. These are rented to local small businesses for a low fee (STLM, 2019).

We can conclude that the municipality is, to some extent, using available funds from mine houses to implement alternative economic projects. The success of these projects and their ability to establish a thriving alternative economy remain to be determined, as they are still in their infancy. Preparation strategies link to those adapted internationally in areas like Appalachia, USA and Cynon Valley, Wales where tourism, social enterprise development and early planning before mine closure where some of the strategies use to reduce the effects of mine closure (O'Keefe, 2024, Seung-hun et al, 2021, Bevan report, 2023).

5.4 Determination of project success and impact

Respondents provided insight into projects they believed had both positive and negative impacts on the community. Infrastructure projects were the most appreciated because their impact is immediately evident, particularly in clinics and schools. However, negative impacts such as unemployment and the lack of post-mining evaluation were also flagged.

5.4.1 *Education and skills training*

The contribution of mining houses to the development of youth's skills and education was cited as having a positive impact on communities. Disadvantaged youth, women, and children benefit immensely from projects sponsored by mining companies. Almost all respondents said these initiatives were well received across all communities. Edwards et al. (2022) highlight the importance of educating the host community and teaching relevant skills as part of the mine closure strategy, years before the life of mine draws to a close. In Appalachia, the community lacked the skills to participate in the planned technological industry, and the government introduced training programmes for residents (Seung-hun et al., 2021).

5.4.2 *Mine closure considerations*

Findings show that mine closures would have devastating effects on the municipality's social and economic well-being. This resonates with studies by Siyongwana et al. (2019) and Syahrir (2021), who highlighted the adverse social effects in the towns they studied. In Pilgrims Rest, Mpumalanga, Siyongwana et al. (2019) found that the closure of a local gold mine led to the town's deterioration. Similar to Syahrir's (2021) findings, projects supported by the mine began to decline, and infrastructure projects such as roads were not maintained after the mine's departure. The local government failed to take over the road maintenance due to a lack of funding. Serfontein-Jordaan et al, (2022) posit that there must be a balance between mining companies and local governments' responsibilities to provide services to communities. Failure to achieve this balance and a lack of local government steering development result in a lack of long-term planning, which affects project sustainability.

Syahrir et al. (2021) studied three localities and the effects of the mines' economies. In Singkep Island, Indonesia, the mine contributed more than 60% to the community's upliftment through infrastructure programs. The mine's economy supported the local community with an airport, hospital, power plant, and piped water to the island. However, the sudden closure of the mine led to high unemployment in the village, and buildings became dilapidated because they could not be maintained (Syahrir et al., 2021). Blyvooruitzicht Village in Gauteng, South Africa, had vast

gold, silver and uranium reserves. The mine operating in this area was considered the most productive, as it accounted for some of the world's gold reserves. Communities benefited from infrastructure projects such as electricity, running water, and sanitation. Other social projects included clinics and recreational fields. Dependence on the mining economy led to negative results after the mine closed (Syahrir et al., 2021). The infrastructure could not be maintained, and a lack of economic diversity became evident in increased unemployment and social ills such as crime.

It is also worth noting that not all mine closures will result in the ghost town phenomenon. Studies show that if adequate measures are put in place to provide alternative economic activities after mining, a city or town can thrive. Examples from this approach are highlighted in the National Mine Closure Strategy (2020) and endorsed by Cole (2024), who states that municipalities must introduce economic activities in parallel with mining. The reference to the introduction of alternative economies resonates with the respondents' findings. Small businesses request training and business development support from the mines, while the authorities affirm their commitment to revitalising the township economy and boosting tourism and agriculture in the municipality (STLM, 2019). However, Marais et al. (2021) found that municipalities often struggle to boost the alternative industries economy to the extent of mine economies. In a study of three local municipalities—Emalahleni, Newcastle, and Matjhabeng—only one, Newcastle, successfully introduced a thriving manufacturing economy after reduced mining activity. Emalahleni and Matjhabeng municipalities continued to rely heavily on mining as their main economic drive after failed attempts to introduce strong alternatives (Marais et al., 2021).

Although STLM’s LED Strategy for 2022-2027 mentions the pressure to introduce alternative economies because of the just transition program, there is no explicit discussion of mine closure. This might be implied in the acknowledgement of the eminent change. There is a realisation that the mines will close; therefore, alternative economic projects are planned in the tourism, agriculture, and manufacturing sectors. Increased support for growing small-business capacity is evident in LED projects that aim to help businesses increase output and produce quality products.

Edwards et al. (2022), in their recommendations for social mine closure, advise that mine houses prepare for the mitigation of mine closure impacts decades before the life of the mine comes to an end. Recommendations include evaluating SLP community development projects for self-sustainability, providing employment and skills training for locals, and building capacity and developing small businesses. The municipality's LED Strategy (2021) also focuses on fostering opportunities for employment, skills training, and enterprise development for local businesses. For the LED strategy to achieve its goals, several factors must be in place, such as political will, adequate municipal financial management, and good governance (Marais et al., 2021).

5.4.3 *Monitoring and evaluation*

Findings show that mine houses do not evaluate projects after implementation and handover. After the project is handed over, the municipality is responsible for monitoring and evaluating its effectiveness. This resonates with Singh et al. (2018), who found that CSR initiatives by businesses typically focus on inputs and a philanthropic approach, without following up on the project's impact on the community. In corporate CSR projects, effectiveness is not evaluated or measured. Measuring standards are not defined before or after implementation, as they are deemed unnecessary, leaving the project's main thrust on inputs and activities, while outcomes are ignored.

This approach resonates with Singh et al.'s (2018) findings that corporations do not apply ET to the projects they implement, but instead focus on compliance with the SLP commitment and on maintaining their licence to operate. Similar studies were conducted in India (Singh et al., 2018) and South Africa (Syahrir et al, 2021), which criticised corporations for failing to adopt a sustainable approach to their community development contributions. Projects are approved based on available funds and proposed needs, and are rarely assessed for their long-term social effectiveness in cases of mine closure. The study by Lu et al. (2019) on water provision projects also found that there is no involvement or interest in evaluating the project after

implementation. To increase the number of sustainable projects, the study calls for governments to make monitoring and evaluation of CSR-regulated projects compulsory.

The Municipality Systems Act (2000) sets guidelines for municipalities to conduct monitoring and evaluation. STLM's LED Strategy (2022-2027) also follows the guidelines, stipulating that monitoring and evaluation will take place. A monitoring committee will be established, comprising LED forum members and selected stakeholders, to evaluate project success using key performance indicators. However, the findings show that this committee is established during the implementation phase, as one of the officials indicated that "during implementation, we have criteria that we tick along the way to see we are meeting objectives" (Responded 9) which raises concerns about how the effectiveness of projects is measured to achieve the intended goals as there is no evaluation after the implementation.

The DMRE is satisfied that the projects have been completed and that the mine houses have complied with the LED obligations. This ties in with findings by Syahrir et al, (2021), who indicated that companies do not evaluate community projects, opting to leave this to implementing partners. Singh et al. (2018) advocate the development of joint monitoring and evaluation standards by all stakeholders, including mine houses, municipalities, and relevant stakeholders. Tshabalala's (2020) study on satisfaction with SLP projects at Exxaro mines in Emakhazeni, Mpumalanga, shows that the findings concur with the literature. Projects sponsored were brick-making, bakery and soap-making. Local small businesses were hired to implement, and local community members were chosen as project beneficiaries. The community project failed to continue after the mine handed it over and exited.

Regarding the project's sustainability beyond the mine's involvement, the company was "reluctant to acknowledge failure" (p. 83). ET practice functions well in a scenario where there is a dedicated monitoring and evaluation team that continuously reflects on project evaluation findings and provides strategic advice throughout the lifecycle of a project (Lu et al, 2019). The inclusion of ET leads to sustainable projects and to the development of appropriate impact measurement post-implementation (Buckley et al., 2015). As spearheads of LED projects, municipalities and mining companies houses must ensure that a monitoring and evaluation team

is available to evaluate the impacts. Moreover, it is important to equip this team with the necessary training to ensure the consistent use of ET from project conception to post-implementation (Buckley et al., 2015).

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed findings from the analysis of data collected from participants with in-depth knowledge of local economic development processes and their application to SLP projects. The research project's main objective was to provide empirical evidence on whether ET practices are applied in the selection, design, implementation, and post-implementation stages of economic development projects in the STLM. The main highlights of the study point to a lack of a clear strategy for applying ET in community projects. Respondents were selected from key informants, including local authority leadership, civil society leaders, and community members, to provide diverse perspectives. The importance of applying ET techniques and practices is that the STLM must develop alternative economies to mining, which requires planning involving all stakeholders, including affected communities.

CHAPTER 6: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

The literature review section of the paper discussed the importance of evaluative thinking as a practical tool in the selection, design and implementation of development projects. A key finding in this research is that there are no guidelines on applying evaluative thinking in the project planning process. Officials relied on their experience from previous projects to determine a project's success. The research sought to explore how the STLM applied evaluative thinking strategies in the planning, execution, and post-implementation stages of local economic development projects in the region. This chapter will provide recommended remedial actions to be implemented by the municipality authorities, the mining houses, and the beneficiary communities to implement evaluation thinking approaches to developing alternative economic development projects in the Steve Tshwete Municipality.

6.2 Summary of key findings

The findings show that while consultation processes are followed, it is not clear whose voice is heard. Ward councillors, community forums, and business groups do not have the final say on selecting SLP projects after they are submitted to mining houses or the IDP. Projects are prioritised based on stakeholder input and the IDP. However, there are many competing priority projects, such as water provision, housing, and electricity. This results in a few projects being implemented and some needs going unmet, which causes frustration due to unmet expectations.

The sustainability of projects is affected by a lack of funding and poor maintenance planning after handover by mining companies. Municipal financial capacity is insufficient to maintain the projects after the mining companies withdraw. There is no long-term funding from the mines after the handover. Poor selection of beneficiaries in community-led projects leads to mismanagement and project collapse due to a lack of skills, commitment, and oversight. Selected beneficiaries lack the training and capacity-building to create long-lasting project impact.

To reduce dependence on mining activities, alternative industries must be developed to mitigate the adverse effects of mine closures. Tourism, agriculture, and manufacturing were identified as potential sectors for diversifying STLM's economy. Lastly, the findings show that the project's post-implementation evaluation is inadequate to address its impacts effectively. Lack of data-driven follow-up hinders accountability and learning, leading to wasted resources.

6.3 Recommendations for policy and practice

1. In light of the statement by respondent 10, who stated that a Memorandum of Agreement is routinely signed between the mining house and the local government authority on completion of a development project to hand over control and ownership from the mining house to the local government, the following recommendations are proposed;

    a. Addition of clauses to the Memorandum of Agreement: The establishment of a joint monitoring committee comprising representatives from all stakeholders, namely the mining houses, the relevant local government authority, and the beneficiary communities. The participation of the mining house that funded the specific development project must not be indefinite, but must be limited to a term agreed by all parties. This transition phase will enable the local government and the community to develop capacity and establish strategies to ensure long-term sustainability of the project.
    b. To mitigate the financial constraints local governments face in funding security and maintenance services for completed development projects, mining houses should consider allocating a portion of their CSR budget to augment the security and maintenance fund after project handover. All stakeholders will jointly monitor this fund to reduce wasteful and fruitless expenditure. Prudent utilisation of the maintenance fund could also contribute to employment creation, with locals employed in security and refurbishment work that may arise.

2. A community development practitioner (Responded 3) indicated that after a project is completed, the community takes control and ownership, and the mining companies play no further role in maintaining or managing it. The respondent also states that community members receive training and skills-building, but does not elaborate on how this is achieved. The following recommendations are derived from this observation:
    a. Mining houses and local government authorities can build local capacity by providing relevant skills training for local SMMEs, cooperatives, women, and youth, empowering them to provide maintenance and security services without outsourcing to external service providers. The maintenance fund would provide employment opportunities for beneficiary communities whilst ensuring that projects are sustainable and benefit the intended recipients.

3. The absence of a clear, comprehensive policy that guides municipal practitioners in applying evaluative thinking across all planning stages of development projects is a potential obstacle to its full implementation and adoption. The following recommendations are derived to assist mining houses and local government authorities in addressing this issue:
    a. Training and capacity building on ET strategies: It is imperative to provide training and capacity-building opportunities for all affected stakeholders to raise awareness of the value of data-based decision-making processes and to impart relevant knowledge. The aim should be to foster inclusive decision-making processes that take into account the diverse views and needs of different stakeholders. If there is no internal capacity to implement and provide training, the service can be outsourced to external experts.
    b. Encouraging transparency and flexibility in project planning and management: The success of community projects is not only based on sound, strategic planning but also on transparency regarding project selection and related decision-making processes. Adopting a top-down approach in which communities are consulted only after projects have been selected or implemented creates apathy and

resistance among the intended beneficiaries. This would reduce incidents of vandalism and the risk of projects becoming white elephants, as communities may not take full ownership and responsibility for them.

c. Continuous assessment and learning: It is paramount for stakeholders to conduct continuous impact assessments of projects. This allows for the development and implementation of monitoring and evaluation systems at every stage of a development project. Diligent documentation of all failures and successes enables stakeholders to collect relevant data on inputs and outcomes.
d. Flexibility and adaptation in project planning and management: The ability to foster and encourage a culture of flexibility and to adapt when desired outcomes are not achieved due to unexpected planning or implementation failures is crucial. Adapting strategies timeously can enhance the effective deployment of resources whilst increasing the chances of a project's success. Applying the evaluative planning principle of data-based decision-making must be implemented by all stakeholders throughout all phases of the development project.

Despite the challenges of skills shortages and low literacy levels among disadvantaged communities, mining houses and local government authorities can embed a culture of evaluative thinking in their respective districts of operation.

6.4 Recommendations for future reseach

a) This qualitative study highlighted the issue of beneficiary selection; future research could use quantitative methods to measure project success rates under different selection criteria.
b) The use of quantitative research models would provide more detailed data on individual project inputs, implementation activities and resultant outcomes. Mining houses and

local government authorities could use the data to develop and refine their development strategies and outcomes, and to improve the productive deployment of resources.

c) South Africa has a large mining sector but has a poor record in handling mine closures, because criteria for mining closure plans emphasise the reclamation of mines and environmental rehabilitation over the development of post-mining economies and the mitigation of socio-economic effects on vulnerable communities. There is a need for more detailed research on developing strategies and impact assessments for mining communities affected by mine closures, and on mitigating their impacts. This research could leverage emerging insights to enhance further the adoption of ET in data-driven planning for sustainable development projects in mining districts.

The research has highlighted the need for STLM and mining companies to include ET in the planning of development projects to improve their chances of success and sustainability. The spectre of ghost town syndrome and its associated social degeneration can be significantly reduced if the planning and execution of development projects adopt an evaluative approach. There is still room for exploring how principles of evaluative thinking can enable mining houses and local authorities to develop alternative economic projects in their areas of operation.

6.5 Conclusion

The research paper sought to assess the extent to which ET techniques are being applied in the conception, design and execution of development projects in the STLM. The introduction chapter outlines the study's background and research purpose. This also identified the reason the study was selected and its relevance to the coal-mining areas, particularly STLM. The literature review chapter highlighted relevant studies and presented the acts and policies regulating the mining sector. The theoretical framework highlighted stakeholder engagement theory, CSR and ET concepts relevant in the research. Comparative studies are also analysed to broaden the perspective and explore concepts researched in similar projects. The methodology section discussed various concepts of the research design and techniques. The aim was to show how the chosen research methodology was arrived at. In the findings chapter, stakeholder views and

assertions were recorded under the themes that emerged during data collection, and these are discussed in the following chapter. Findings show that although there is some awareness in specific management sectors of the importance of applying ET techniques, no formal strategy is in place to implement them.

Many studies explore the effects of mine closure, and this study contributes to an already growing body of knowledge on this phenomenon. The challenges of transitioning to alternative economies for mining communities will always require continuous research to create options for navigating the ever-changing South African and global economic landscape. Introducing ET practices into SLP community development projects will contribute to their self-sustainability even after mine closure.

CHAPTER 7: BIBLIOGRAPHY

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