Fostering Sustainable Development through Eradication of Poverty by 2030 in Developing Countries: A Case Study of Eswatini

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated sustainable development through poverty eradication in Eswatini, a small landlocked country in Southern Africa, where approximately 60% of the population lives below the poverty line. With the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) deadline approaching and Goal 1 (No Poverty) remaining a critical challenge, this research sought to identify key factors contributing to poverty, examine their impacts on sustainable development, investigate effective reduction strategies, and develop a comprehensive framework for poverty eradication. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach underpinned by Interpretivism, the study collected data through semi-structured interviews with twenty participants comprising eight poverty alleviation programme officers and twelve individuals living in poverty, selected through purposive sampling. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed nine interconnected factors contributing to poverty: unemployment, high birthrate and teenage pregnancy, poor and expensive education, poor economy and high cost of living, poor governance, corruption, climate change, gender inequality, and poor resource utilisation. The study established that these factors interact in complex ways that compound disadvantage, particularly for women, rural communities, and youth. Poverty was found to significantly impede sustainable development across health, education, economic growth, gender equality, peace and security, and food security dimensions. Based on the empirical findings and grounded in the Basic Needs Approach and Modernization Theory, the study developed the Comprehensive Framework for Reducing Poverty and Promoting Sustainable Development (CFRPPSD), structured around four pillars: Economic Empowerment, Human Capital Development, Institutional Development, and Social Protection and Inclusion. The framework provides actionable guidance for coordinated poverty reduction efforts aligned with the SDGs. The study recommends that the Government of Eswatini adopt the framework, prioritising governance reform and anti-corruption measures as foundational interventions.

Keywords: Poverty Eradication; Sustainable Development; SDGs; Eswatini; Basic Needs Approach; Modernization Theory; Framework Development

INTRODUCTION

Attaining sustainable development and eradicating poverty remain the greatest challenges facing developing countries worldwide. In 2015, the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), establishing an ambitious framework to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure peace and prosperity for all by 2030 (UNDP, 2024). Goal 1, 'No Poverty,' recognises that ending poverty in all its forms everywhere is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development (UN, 2024).

Despite decades of progress, extreme poverty persists globally, with nearly 700 million people subsisting on less than $2.15 per day (World Bank, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic reversed three decades of steady progress in poverty reduction, with the number of people living in extreme poverty increasing for the first time in a generation (UN DESA, 2023). Developing countries, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, face disproportionate challenges in achieving the SDGs due to multiple crises causing slowdown and regression in some areas (Africa Economic Report, 2023).

Eswatini, a small landlocked country in Southern Africa, exemplifies these challenges. Despite government efforts to mainstream SDGs into its development framework since 2015, poverty remains pervasive and persistent (World Bank, 2024). Approximately 60% of the population lives below the poverty line, with high levels of inequality, unemployment, and limited access to education and healthcare exacerbating poverty rates. The country's poverty reflects a scarcity of formal jobs outside the public sector, a weak business climate, limited economic opportunities, and insufficient growth-enabling infrastructure (Kwakwa, 2024).

While extensive literature exists on poverty and sustainable development globally, there is limited context-specific research examining poverty dynamics in Eswatini from the perspectives of local stakeholders. Most existing studies employ quantitative approaches that fail to capture the lived experiences and nuanced understanding of poverty that local populations possess (Barbosa et al., 2020). Furthermore, while Eswatini has benchmarked strategies from other countries, particularly South Africa, these transplanted approaches often require investments beyond the country's capacity and fail to address context-specific factors (Francoise, 2023).

This study addresses these gaps by investigating sustainable development through poverty eradication in Eswatini. The research objectives were to: (1) identify and analyse key factors contributing to poverty from local perspectives; (2) examine the impacts of poverty on sustainable development; (3) investigate effective strategies for poverty reduction; and (4) develop a comprehensive framework for reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development by 2030. The study contributes to knowledge by providing context-specific understanding of poverty dynamics, integrating theoretical frameworks to develop a novel poverty reduction framework, and offering actionable recommendations for policy and practice.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical perspectives: the Basic Needs Approach (BNA) and Modernization Theory. The BNA, introduced by the International Labour Organization in 1976, defines poverty in terms of unmet fundamental human requirements and aims to identify the minimum bundle of goods and services required for human wellbeing, including food, shelter, healthcare, education, clean water, and sanitation (Chiappero-Martinetti, 2014). The approach emphasises participatory involvement of communities in defining and addressing their needs and provides diagnostic power for identifying poverty interventions (Goodpal, 2018).

Modernization Theory, developed in the 1950s, provides prescriptive guidance by asserting that adoption of modern practices and institutional reforms can accelerate development (Perera, 2024). The theory identifies five stages of development through which societies transition from traditional subsistence economies to modern industrial states. Applied to poverty reduction, it advocates for technological innovation, digital transformation, industrialisation, human capital development, and institutional modernisation as catalysts for escaping poverty (Thakur, 2019).

While both theories have received criticism—the BNA for potential arbitrariness in defining needs and Modernization Theory for Western-centrism—their integration provides a robust framework combining diagnostic and prescriptive power. The BNA identifies what people need, while Modernization Theory suggests how to deliver those needs through systemic transformation. This integrated theoretical lens guided data collection, analysis, and framework development in this study.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach underpinned by interpretivist philosophy to gain a deep understanding of context-specific data surrounding poverty in Eswatini. The phenomenological design was adopted to explore the essence of poverty experiences from the perspectives of those who have lived it or worked to address it (Neubauer et al., 2019). This approach enabled the researcher to capture rich descriptions of how poverty is experienced, perceived, and understood by local stakeholders.

Sampling and Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to select information-rich cases (Palinkas et al., 2015). Twenty participants were recruited, comprising eight poverty alleviation programme officers (P1-P8) with at least two years of experience in poverty-related programmes, and twelve individuals living in poverty (D1-D12) identified using Eswatini's national poverty line. Sample size was determined by data saturation, where no new information emerged from additional interviews (Bazen et al., 2021).

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between May and August 2025. An interview guide aligned with the four research objectives facilitated conversations lasting approximately 60 minutes. Interviews were conducted in person at participants' preferred locations, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility to pursue emergent themes while ensuring coverage of key topics (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed six phases: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Analysis was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than imposing predetermined categories. Themes were organised according to the research objectives, with particular attention to factor interactions and intersectionality.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from Africa Research University. Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were assigned codes (P1-P8 for programme officers; D1-D12 for individuals living in poverty) to protect identities. Voluntary participation was emphasised, with participants free to withdraw at any time without consequence.

RESULTS

Factors Contributing to Poverty

The analysis identified nine interconnected factors contributing to poverty in Eswatini, presented in Table 1. These factors were consistently identified across both participant groups, though with varying emphasis.

Table 1: Nine Priority Factors Contributing to Poverty in Eswatini

Factor	Primary Impact	Severity
Unemployment	Limited income; inability to meet basic needs	CRITICAL
Birthrate/Teenage Pregnancy	School dropout; reduced income potential	HIGH
Poor/Expensive Education	Limited skills; intergenerational poverty	CRITICAL
Poor Economy/High Cost of Living	Insufficient incomes; survival-level living	CRITICAL
Poor Governance	Inefficient resource allocation; weak institutions	CRITICAL
Corruption	Resource loss; inequitable service delivery	HIGH
Climate Change	Agricultural collapse; food insecurity	HIGH
Gender Inequality	Limited women's income; restricted decision-making	CRITICAL
Poor Resource Utilisation	Wasted investments; gambling addiction	HIGH

Unemployment emerged as the most critical factor. As P8 articulated: "The high rate of unemployment is causing poverty in Eswatini. In a family of ten, only one person could be working... even if you are lucky enough to secure [a job], the salary won't be satisfying enough to cater for basic necessities." Individuals living

in poverty confirmed this, with D6 stating: "I have been looking for a job almost everywhere... I just live living for the sake of living, otherwise life no longer has a meaning."

Governance failures and corruption were identified as foundational barriers. P4 noted: "*Corruption has exacerbated poverty... it would be announced that the country has received monetary assistance, but little would reach where it's supposed to.*" D11 provided a personal account: "*My father died due to respiratory disease from mine work... we were supposed to make claims through the local government. We opened bank accounts three years ago, and only a few received that money.*"

Gender inequality was identified as a critical poverty multiplier. P5 explained: "*The community leadership council called 'bandlancane' is totally men across the country... women are not represented, their voices are silent.*" The intersection of gender with other factors created a compound disadvantage for women.

Impacts of Poverty on Sustainable Development

Participants identified six SDG areas significantly impacted by poverty: health (SDG3), education (SDG4), economic growth (SDG8), gender equality (SDG5), peace and security (SDG16), and food security (SDG2). P8 summarised: "*Our economic performance has been negatively affected by poverty. Most people are not able to actively participate in economic growth. They cannot start businesses because they don't have capital.*"

The research revealed that poverty creates vicious cycles across multiple dimensions. For instance, poverty limits access to education, which limits employment prospects, which perpetuates poverty. P4 noted the impact on peace: "*Before we were known as one of the peaceful countries in Africa. However, today that isn't the case... poverty-related issues were the primary cause of [recent] national conflict.*"

Strategies for Poverty Reduction

Participants identified eight strategic approaches: governance reform, anti-corruption measures, education system reform, job creation, food security enhancement, gender equality promotion, social protection improvement, and economic growth promotion. A critical finding was that strategies have prerequisite relationships—governance reform must precede or accompany other interventions for maximum effectiveness.

P2 emphasised integrated approaches: "*Success requires a strong, well-defined national plan that brings together all stakeholders—government, NGOs, donors, and communities—under a shared vision.*" D5 stressed employment: "*If the government can try to create more jobs, it can definitely go a long way in curbing issues of poverty.*"

The Comprehensive Framework for Poverty Reduction

Based on the empirical findings and theoretical foundations, the study developed the Comprehensive Framework for Reducing Poverty and Promoting Sustainable Development (CFRPPSD). The framework is structured around four pillars (Table 2).

Table 2: Four-Pillar Framework Structure (CFRPPSD)

Pillar	Focus Areas	Key Interventions
Economic Empowerment	Employment, enterprise development, economic growth	Job creation, SME support, investment attraction, skills training
Human Capital Development	Education, health, skills	Education reform, healthcare access, vocational training
Institutional Development	Governance, accountability, rule of law	Anti-corruption, transparency, institutional reform
Social Protection & Inclusion	Safety nets, gender equality, food security	Expanded grants, women's empowerment, agricultural support

The framework recognises that Institutional Development (Pillar 3) is foundational—governance improvements enable effective implementation of interventions under other pillars. Implementation timelines range from immediate (2024-2026) for governance reform to ongoing (2024-2030) for economic empowerment activities.

DISCUSSION

The finding that unemployment is the primary poverty driver corroborates Aderounmu et al. (2021), who established that unemployment causes poverty in Nigeria. However, this study extends understanding by revealing that unemployment in Eswatini operates within a nexus with education and governance—poor governance leads to inadequate educational investment, producing graduates without market-relevant skills who cannot find employment despite qualifications. This interconnection suggests that addressing unemployment requires simultaneous attention to education quality and governance reform.

The identification of gender inequality as a critical poverty multiplier aligns with UN Women's (2024) observation that women's poverty is fuelled by discrimination, limited access to resources, and deep-rooted stereotypes. The Eswatini context presents a particularly acute manifestation through cultural exclusion from community leadership structures ('bandlancane'), legal restrictions on property ownership, and educational disruption through teenage pregnancy. These compound disadvantages create what may be termed a 'feminisation of poverty' requiring gender-responsive interventions.

The emphasis that participants placed on governance reform as a prerequisite for other poverty reduction strategies has significant implications for development programming. This finding aligns with the World Bank's (2023) observation that nations cannot adequately address poverty without improving institutional quality. It suggests that investments in education, healthcare, or economic development may underperform without concurrent attention to governance strengthening—a critical insight for donors and development partners programming in Eswatini.

The CFRPPSD framework contributes to the literature by integrating the diagnostic power of the Basic Needs Approach with the prescriptive guidance of Modernization Theory. While previous frameworks have addressed poverty from single theoretical perspectives, this integrated approach enables identification of both what needs to change (unmet basic needs) and how change can be achieved (through modernisation and institutional reform). The framework's four-pillar structure ensures comprehensive coverage, while the sequencing guidance addresses implementation realities.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The qualitative nature and sample of twenty participants, while appropriate for phenomenological research, limit statistical generalisability. The reliance on self-reported data may be subject to recall bias and social desirability effects. While the CFRPPSD framework is grounded in empirical findings, its practical effectiveness remains to be demonstrated through implementation and evaluation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has demonstrated that poverty in Eswatini is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon driven by nine interconnected factors that compound disadvantage, particularly for women, rural communities, and youth. The achievement of SDG 1 by 2030 requires integrated strategies that address factor interactions and sequence interventions appropriately, with governance reform as a foundational prerequisite.

The CFRPPSD framework developed in this study provides actionable guidance for coordinated poverty reduction aligned with the SDGs. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

a) **Government of Eswatini:** Adopt the CFRPPSD framework as a national poverty reduction strategy; prioritise governance reform and anti-corruption measures as foundational interventions; develop a comprehensive employment strategy with decent work standards; expand social protection coverage and increase grant values to reflect true basic needs costs.

b) **Development Partners:** Align programming with the evidence-based framework; strengthen community-based monitoring to address corruption; prioritise women's economic empowerment programmes.

c) **Future Research:** Conduct quantitative validation of factor relationships; evaluate CFRPPSD implementation; undertake comparative studies across Southern African countries.

With fewer than five years remaining before the 2030 deadline, urgent action is required. The knowledge and strategies exist; what remains is the collective will to implement them. Eswatini has the opportunity to demonstrate that even small, resource-constrained countries can achieve transformational change when evidence-based strategies are implemented with commitment and coordination.

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