

This document seeks to distil the research process and findings for the thesis paper entitled:

Inequality in South Africa's politicised wilderness: Are government-led skills programmes shifting the power base or bolstering the status quo?

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➤ Purpose and research objectives

The paper sought to contribute to a theoretical body of knowledge surrounding social equity in conservation areas. The research was narrowed to explore the efficacy of government-led skills programmes in facilitating a transformation of power to marginalized South Africans and improving equitable employment the wildlife economy. Research objectives:

(RO1) Assess the extent to which governmental initiatives to enhance black empowerment via skills training are perceived by relevant stakeholders to fulfil their purpose as described in relevant policy documents and reports.

(RO2) Contextualise the perceptions of relevant stakeholders within wider theory to draw out the significant strengths and/or weaknesses of nationally accredited skills training programmes in challenging structural inequality.

➤ Case study region and respondents

Research took place within the Greater Kruger National Park region of South Africa. The research consulted a wide array of stakeholders including skills training programme students and facilitators, NGO directors, and HR/training directors at private sector lodge groups to build a holistic understanding of the research objectives. A robust policy analysis was conducted to understand the purpose and goals of governmental skills development in community empowerment.

➤ Review of the literature

In 2015, South Africa's National Development Plan 2030 identified the wildlife economy as a key growth sector to the national economy and a positive force for rural development while protecting the country's flora and fauna. The ecological value of the empowerment of local people in the conservation agenda is undeniably contested. A brief literature review was conducted to assess both the ecological value and business case for community engagement, while the paper moved forth with the assumption that social equity is a pre-requisite for successful and ethical long-term conservation models.

The paper offered a theorization of structural inequality, defining it, within the closed-market labour system of rural South Africa, as a designed system of exclusion and dispossession. The paper argues that for structural inequality to be dismantled, individuals' *position* within a structure must change. The paper theorized that skills development could, but does not necessarily, act as a catalyst to change the position of local South Africans across private-sector organograms by increasing the value of their work, thus challenging structural inequality.

➤ Methodology

The project was qualitative and interpretivist in nature, examining the subjective realities of various stakeholders. The research instruments used in the primary research were semi-structured interviews, adjusted for each participant group. Participatory methods were leveraged with student respondents due to insufficient data collection in pilot interviews. The logic behind the paper did not intend to account for every practical or individualistic application of skills training, which would necessitate larger sample sizes, but was rather aimed to leverage snapshots of human experience to flesh out a theoretical discussion on government-led transitions of structural inequality in areas of politicised wilderness. The paper serves as a base line for further, more practical work surrounding issues of social equity in conservation areas.

➤ Analysis

The data was analysed in iterative first and second cycle coding. A malleable coding structure was devised from wider theory before first cycle coding, after which an open coding and indexing process was used to allow emergent concepts to surface. Second cycle coding allowed for the identification of recurrent concepts and allowed for the abstraction of the data to develop more insightful theoretical constructs. The goal of this divergent and subsequently convergent coding strategy was not necessarily to build consensus among participant groups, but rather to check for areas of general thematic agreement as well as valuable areas of contestation between stakeholders. All data was analysed against a coding structure using NVivo 12.

➤ Findings

RO1) Analysing policy and perceptions

Table: Goals of government-led skills programmes synthesized from policy documents

Goal code	Synthesised goal
SG1	Enhance black participation in the economy to redress apartheid era inequalities associated with forced resettlement, dispossession and economic marginalisation.
SG2	Reduce dependency on 'imported' talent by puncturing caps in career progression through the effective upskilling of local employees towards high-skill and managerial positions.
SG3	Improve equality by ensuring that the tourism industry is demographically representative of South African societies at all levels of the organogram.
SG4	Address issues of poor work readiness for young and entry-level professionals, especially by blending practical experience with theoretical knowledge, providing mentorship, and facilitating robust work-integrated learning experiences.
SG5	Cultivate strong employer partnerships to create logical pathways into work for graduates of training programs and diminish the demoralisation of students who struggle to find work despite earning a qualification.
SG6	Provide post-school education that contributes to intergenerational social mobility.

There was misalignment between the goals set forth by policy documents and reports and the perceptions of their success by stakeholders. In summary:

- Economic inclusion in the sector was lauded but debatable in practice due to a tendency towards philanthropic CSR initiatives and sustained inequity in medium to high skill positions.
- Hiring quotas and good intentions lead low-skill positions to consistently be filled by locals; however, a cap in career progression noted by the respondents reflects sustained dependency on imported talent and a lack of demographically equitable representation in the labour market for local employees.
- A lack of perceived quality of government-led nationally accredited programmes by employers degrades the ability of graduates to move seamlessly into quality work positions, despite a strong tendency for students to believe their certificate will result in finding a job.
- The hermeneutic value of earning a certificate that increases the professionalisation and transferability of acquired skills was underscored by both student and employer participants.
- Nationally accredited programmes were not perceived to address issues of poor work readiness for entry-level employees. Soft-skills and practical experience were highlighted as two areas of improvement.
- Intergenerational social mobility was widely recognized by student/employee participants as a goal of joining the tourism/hospitality workforce, although caps in upward career mobility suggest that intergenerational social (and economic) mobility may be limited.

RO2) Shifting the power base or bolstering the status quo?

Impacts of government-led skills programmes were separated between micro (individual) level impacts and meso (community) level impacts. A lack of community-level benefits suggests that government-led skills programmes, which focus on low-level and occupational skills development, are not largely successful in shifting the power base to local citizens.

Table: Positive and negative impacts of examined government-led skills programmes

	Micro (individual) level	Meso (community) level
Positive impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pride and confidence associated with earning a certificate • Greater transferability of skills • Professionalisation of skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • n/a
Negative impacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential demoralisation for students who earn a certificate and struggle to become employed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total number of employees hired from community remains unaffected • High-skill and managerial positions are still 'imported'

Low skill training as a zero-sum game

Entry level staff positions are filled by local employees regardless of whether skills training programmes exist due to social and/or legislative mandates. The instance of a certified individual earning a position as an entry level staff member adds value for that individual, but simply displaces the value earned by another individual (certified or not), and vice versa. As such, no additional cash flow, paid in salary, is absorbed into the local community and the number of total employees absorbed into the wildlife economy remains the same. For skills development to add value at the meso-level and facilitate a transition of power towards communities, these programmes must allow employees to increase their salary (and thus the economic benefit to the community) and/or their position or status within a company, allowing for upward career mobility and more local employees to join the workforce.

Saturation of the entry level labour market

The skew of nationally accredited skills programmes towards low skill training coupled with a cap in upward career progression for local employees presents a “squeeze” at entry level layers of employment. Certifying a greater number of low-skill prospective employees increases the supply of low-skill (entry level) workers despite a somewhat stagnant demand in the labour market. Furthermore, the lack of upward career mobility makes it difficult for current employees to be promoted, opening positions at the entry level and making room for new and younger employees. While theoretical in nature, the oversupply of low-skill workers can place more power in the hands of employers and has the potential to drive down wages as well as hermeneutic benefits of work as low-skill employees are easily replaceable. This also increases the potential for the demoralisation of young professionals who invest in accredited courses with the hopes of finding employment in a saturated labour market.

➤ Final remarks

The data suggests that skills programmes need to deliver demand-driven skills training that allow marginalised South Africans to progress to higher levels of the organogram, or to become equipped to fill unconventional positions across the tourism value chain that match their diverse career aspirations. More logical and successful pathways into employment must be developed for accredited courses, necessitating the quality and perception of government-led courses must also improve.

Future work building from this research could explore more practical applications of the theory presented here. A quantitative or mixed-method approach would do well to map the real saturation of the labour market in the wildlife economy. Further consideration could be given to community heterogeneity; a gendered exploration of empowerment via skills training could prove useful, given the tourism industry’s characteristic gender biases across roles. Finally, the tourism value chain presents significant opportunity for local engagement, but is not explored in this paper. An assessment of skills development potential for entrepreneurial jobs across the value chain could be widely useful to the sector.