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Assessing the Understanding of Stakeholders about Local Economic Development (LED) as a Concept at the Helao Nafidi Town Council, Namibia

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this study was to assess the understanding of stakeholders on local economic development (LED) as a concept at the Helao Nafidi Town Council (HNTC) of the Ohangwena region (OhR), Namibia (a developing country). The understanding of LED as a concept signifies an informative and integrated understanding aimed at Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which combine environmental, economic, social, institutional, and political aspects by identifying their interlinkages in realising SDGs in local governments.
This study aimed to assess stakeholders' understanding of LED as a concept at the HNTC. The study used stakeholder theory (ST), which provided a framework for exploring the processes of effective interventions of stakeholders in a management sense, and questionnaires were designed to meet the objectives of this study. Data were collected through the quantitative research method (QRM) and analysed using Microsoft Excel (MSE) which provided relevant analysis for the data.
The framework assessment of understanding made in this study indicates that the LED process is dominated or influenced by both internal and external stakeholders regarding intervention strategies to “deal with” sustainable measurements and minimal standards for the LED initiative.

Keywords: Concept, Understanding, Stakeholders

1. INTRODUCTION

The study focused on assessing the understanding of stakeholders about Local Economic Development (LED) as a concept in the Helao Nafidi Town Council (HNTC) of the Ohangwena region, Namibia. Office of Prime Minister (OPM) (2011) states that for local governments (LGs) in Namibia, LED is a locally driven process of identifying and utilising local resources and economic opportunities to stimulate social, economic, political, institutional, cultural, and environmental aspects for employment activities to achieve sustainable LED and growth in a local area by LGs across the globe. LED has been described by Selaelo (2012, as cited in Marenga and Kandjeo (2019) as a new approach that has the potential to accelerate the developmental process at subnational levels of government with a focus on the local economy.

LED is defined as a process in which local authorities, community-based organisations, and public-private sectors work collectively as partners to develop and maintain a better quality of life for residents through LED initiatives (Blakely & Leigh, 2016; Rogerson & Nel, 2015).
OPM (2011) asserts that the rationale of local governments towards LED is to improve governance; stimulate economic development and restructuring; encourage social progression and improve the quality of life in local, rural, urban, and regional areas. OPM (2011) defines LED as a process by which actors within urban and rural areas work collectively with public, business, and non-governmental sectors to create better conditions for economic development, growth, employment generation, and wealth to enhance the quality of life for all in the community.

As a result, from the perspective of LED history, partnerships between or involvement of stakeholders (government, Public-Private Sectors (PPS), Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Community-Based Organisations (CBOs), and local communities) have been the edifice upon which the success of LED rests (Meyer, 2016).

In its traditional sense, Cobert (2013) indicates that LED aims to build up a local area's local economic capacity so that the above will be realised only when the public, businesses, and NGOs work together to create employment opportunities to allow for improved economic growth, sustainable development, and less poverty in communities. Cobert (2013) further indicates that most of the proponents of LED have applauded it for being successful because it incorporates the needs of the locals. Thus, HNTC recognised that there was a need to review the strategic plan (SP) because it was viewed that the Strategic Plan, as adopted from 2016 to 2021, held significant merit. As a result, the Council entrusted the office of the Local Economic Development Officer (LEDO) to spearhead the needed review, and as such, the LEDO, together with the entire administration, updated and revised the plan so that it could guide the Council for five years, 2022 - 2026.

Thus, given the aforementioned, the researchers were driven to conduct this study entitled, “Assessing the Understanding of Stakeholders on LED as a Concept in the HNTC of the OhR, Namibia. To achieve the objectives of the study, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

- How do you understand LED as a concept for the HNTC?
- What are the various intervention strategies for effective LED for HNTC?

The significance of the study lies in that it is of great importance to the Local Development Officer/s (LEDO/s) and residents in LGs, and the findings can assist in the execution of effective management of a sustainable LED initiative in the HNTC as an LG of the Ohangwena Region. Similarly, none of the studies carried out in Namibia assessing the understanding of stakeholders on local economic developments (LEDs) as a concept have been conducted using QRM and the involvement of stakeholders who are directly or indirectly involved in the execution of LEDs in LGs. Hence, the current study sought to assess the understanding of stakeholders on LED as a concept through the application of Stakeholders Theory (ST).

The results of the study can assist in evidence-based policy and regulation, thereby making and bolstering various effective intervention strategies by internal and external stakeholders to confirm the effective interventions for the best practices of the LED initiatives for LGs. Specifically, this study seeks to contribute to the literature related to the understanding of LED as a concept for effectively managing sustainable local development for LGs in rural areas of Namibia and other developing countries by improving the Socio-Economic Conditions (SECs) and maintaining the Quality of Life for the Local Community (QLLC).

1.1. Local Economic Development (LED) as a Concept

OPM (2011) indicates that LED refers to strategies and initiatives at local levels: a village, town, municipality, city, region, or a particular area and/or community within rural and urban areas or regions. Thus, the term LED refers to both local and regional levels. LED, as asserted in Blakely and Leigh (2016), is an approach towards economic development that allows and encourages local people to work together to achieve sustainable economic development, thereby bringing economic benefits and improved quality of life for all residents in a local municipal or town area. Blakely and Leigh (2016) further assert that LED is intended to maximise the economic potential of all towns and municipal localities throughout the country and to enhance the resilience of macroeconomic growth through increased local economic growth, employment creation, and development initiatives within the context of sustainable development.

Similarly, Fray (2010, as cited in Mashamaite & Lethoko, 2018) defines LED as an approach by which local people continuously work together and with other stakeholders to achieve sustainable local economic growth and development that brings about an improved quality of life for all local citizens. Odhiambo (2010, as cited in Masikane, 2021) asserts that LED is an approach and interrelated process for economic development at local, regional, and national levels in both developing and developed countries. Thus, LED is regarded as an interdisciplinary field of study that encompasses economic assessment, physical planning, environmental analysis, and social, economic, and marketing interventions.

According to Khambule (2018), LED is a locally facilitated activity that seeks to stimulate the local economy and create jobs by identifying, harnessing, and utilising resources in a locality. Khambule (2018) and Reddy and Wallis (2011) view LED as denoting broad-based contributions of the local community, i.e., NGOs, town, business, labour, and local communities who believe that combining their skills, resources, and ideas will uplift their local communities economically.

Thus, it has been asserted and indicated that the elected officials/ councillors and employed staff of LRGs must work completely where local people live, identify local needs, know local capacities and aspirations, and meet "them" face to face for every intervention strategy for sustainable LED (Nikolova & Arsic, 2017; Budds, 2013). Finally, Budds (2013, as cited in Yuliaty, 2021), urges that when devolution is well planned, efficiently implemented, and competently managed, local and regional governments (LRGs) will be able to take effective decentralisation including LED initiatives, by establishing legal frameworks with clear mandates in the field of sustainable LED.

1.2. Evolution of LED

Rogerson (2013) suggests that LED initially emerged as a way of responding to industrial cities such as Manchester in England and to come up with answers to the cities' problems. Blakely (2010, as cited in Blakely & Leigh, 2016) indicates that LED did not emerge simply as land use planning, nor did it emerge as a sectoral approach, but it connects local infrastructure developments (Blakely & Leigh, 2016). Rogerson (2013) shares the same sentiments with Keeble (1969), who further articulated that planning for LED in early industrial cities was concerned with eliminating the impacts of the communist economy approach that led to congestion, underdevelopment, and unbalanced development (Rogerson & Nel, 2015).

The industrialisation period distorted cities to the extent that poverty, ill health, and overcrowding became prominent features in most of the LGs. The World Bank (2010) noted and indicated that LED has gone through three broad developmental waves or stages since the 1950s. Each of the waves has its attention and instruments. LED practitioners have developed a better understanding of LED (both effective and failed) programmes in each wave. LED policy and practice are currently in their "third wave".

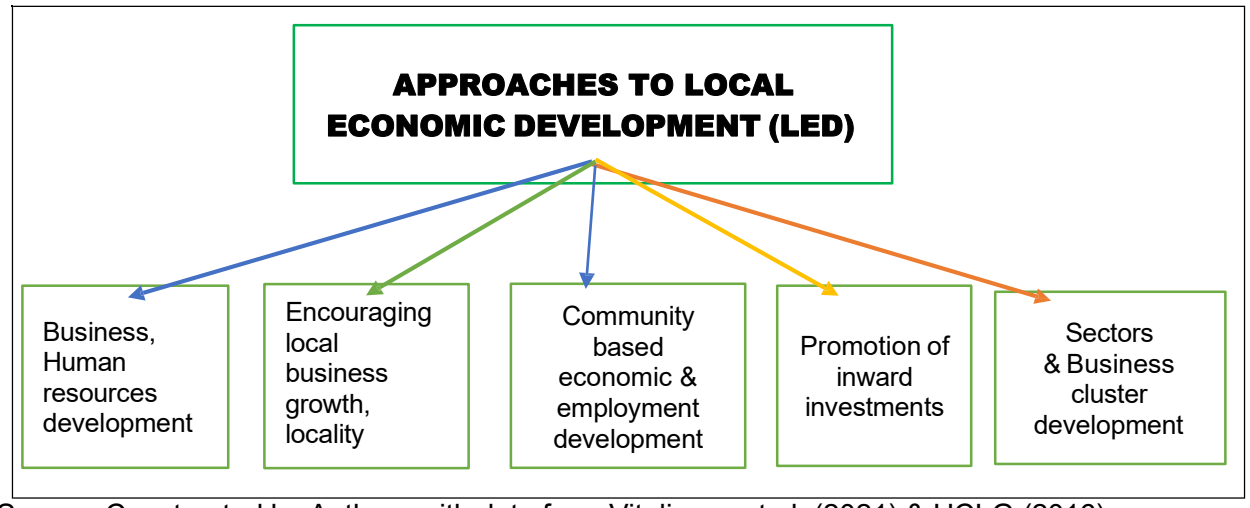
Davis and Rylance (2005) and Oduro-Ofori (2011, as cited in Defferew, 2020) assert that although LED has moved through each of these waves, elements of each wave are still practiced today. The fundamentals amongst them are the role of LG, the private sector, NGOs, and the local community in creating opportunities to work together to improve the local economy. Within all these waves, the concept also focuses on enhancing competitiveness, increasing sustainable growth, and ensuring inclusive growth. The first wave of LED was experienced during the period from the 1960s to the early 1980s, and its emphasis was on mobile manufacturing investment and agricultural production. The focus during this stage was to attract foreign investment and hard infrastructure by providing grants, subsidies, and tax allowances. Swinburn and Yatta (2006) and Kanyane (2008) in Defferew (2020) asserted that in the second wave from the 1980s to the mid-1990s, and during this stage, the focus moved towards the retention and expansion of local businesses as well as internal/inward investment targeted at specific local sectors.

World Bank (2010), and Kahika and Karyeija (2017) highlight that during the third wave from the late 1990s onwards, the focus shifted from direct financial assistance towards making the whole business environment conducive by focusing on soft infrastructure, the creation of partnerships and networks, supporting the formation of business clusters and the development of the workforce through education and training with a view of encouraging entrepreneurship. As a result, Pike et al. (2017, as cited in ICAT, 2020) indicate that recent international governance trends have seen a shift from 'top-down' to 'bottom-up' approaches to local and regional economic development (LRED) alongside a move from government to governance and devolution of powers to the sub-national level (Shannon, 2018). Thus, Shannon (2018) highlights that the early approaches to LRED were characterised by the central state delivering development to lagging regions through the injection of resources from the outside on standardised one-size-fits-all lines.

1.3. Approaches towards LED

Blakely (2010, as cited in Blakey & Leigh, 2016), indicates that the uniqueness of approaches to LED as a set of opportunities and challenges in the context of locality needs various approaches to be designed to advance LED. As a result, this means that the designed approach will lead to an advanced shift the market to the local economy.

Vitalisova et al. (2021) and UCLG (2016) categorised the broad approaches of LED to include business development, resource development (human & financial), locality development, and community-based economic and employment development.



Source: Constructed by Authors with data from Vitalisova et al. (2021) & UCLG (2016)

Figure 1. Approaches to Local Economic Development Process

A business development approach is important to the LED as the attraction, creation, and retention of business enterprises help to maintain a strong and vibrant local economy. It is intended to redress the balance between community as a social construct and business as an instrument for growth and wealth creation (Blakely & Leigh, 2016; Reddy, 2014). Thus, Koma (2014) asserts that this approach also sees the need to initiate self-employment activities that are supposed to help the unemployed establish employment ventures for themselves using their primary resources. This initiative provides training and loans to the unemployed to initiate new, independent, and community-serving businesses (Koma, 2014; Aymeku, 2012). Koma (2014) further asserts that the components of the locality development approach include land use planning, the development of visual themes that create a sense of identity, improvement of the amenity base or liveability of the community or local area, and improvement of the attractiveness of the civic centre to improve local business.

The UN-Habitat (2005, as cited in Haindongo, 2017) and Rogerson and Nel (2015) highlight that the community-based economic and employment development approach seeks to create employment opportunities and stimulate inward investments in a particular local area through the implementation of a range of activities. The approach cuts across all the other approaches within the concept. It combines strategies and tools from the other three approaches, which focus on a particular territory or local area to ensure its local economic development. According to Sienkiewicz (2014), the sector and business cluster development approach also supports inter-firm collaboration and encourages people engaged in the same or similar clusters to meet and exchange ideas on business development opportunities. Small business clusters are also encouraged to ensure that their full potentials are utilised to the fullest in improving SECs and maintaining QLLC.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the pragmatism paradigm to allow the research to be objective. The pragmatism research philosophy played an important role in producing the appropriate information about the phenomenon of LED. The study used the Quantitative Research Method (QRM) to gain relevant information on the understanding of stakeholders of the LED concept and various intervention strategies for effective LED initiatives. The QRM approach views human thought and behaviour in a social context and covers a wide range of phenomena to understand and appreciate them thoroughly (Saunders, 2019; Eysi, 2016; Bhattacherjee, 2012).

The target population of the study consisted of twenty-five (25) local stakeholders. Purposive sampling was used with the reason that only local stakeholders (small & medium micro-entrepreneurs (SMMEs) and local

community resourceful persons (LCRPs)) who have been in HNTC for more than five (5) years would be selected to participate in the study. The QRM used a questionnaire as a data collection instrument. The self-administered questionnaires were given to twenty-five (25) local stakeholders, aimed at getting relevant information to assess the understanding of stakeholders on LED as a concept in the HNTC. The researcher obtained permission letters from the IUM, Ohangwena Regional Council, and HNTC before conducting the study.

The researcher made appointments with local SMMEs and LCRPs for the quantitative method (self-administered questionnaire) at their convenient time to avoid interfering with their daily duties and responsibilities. The researchers distributed the questionnaires to local stakeholders (as mentioned above) and collected them on a Friday. The researcher analysed data using Microsoft Excel as a statistical analysis for QRM.

2.1. Ethical Considerations

Firstly, the researchers obtained permission letters from the IUM postgraduate study research committee (IUMPGSRC), OhRC, and HNTC to carry out research in HNTC as an LG. Secondly, by distributing the consent form to the participants' information sheet respectively, the researcher explained the purpose of the research, the participants' rights, how results would be handled, and how confidentiality would be maintained. Thirdly, the participants were requested to feel free to ask questions if they wanted further clarification, and it was also made clear that they were free to withdraw from the study at any stage. Lastly, it was only after this process that the participants were requested to sign the informed consent form if they agreed to be part of the study.

3.1. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

3.1.1. Gender of Local Research Participants

The research participants were requested to indicate their gender during data collection procedures. Figure 2 below presents the results for the QRM distribution of gender for each category (male & female) of the population.

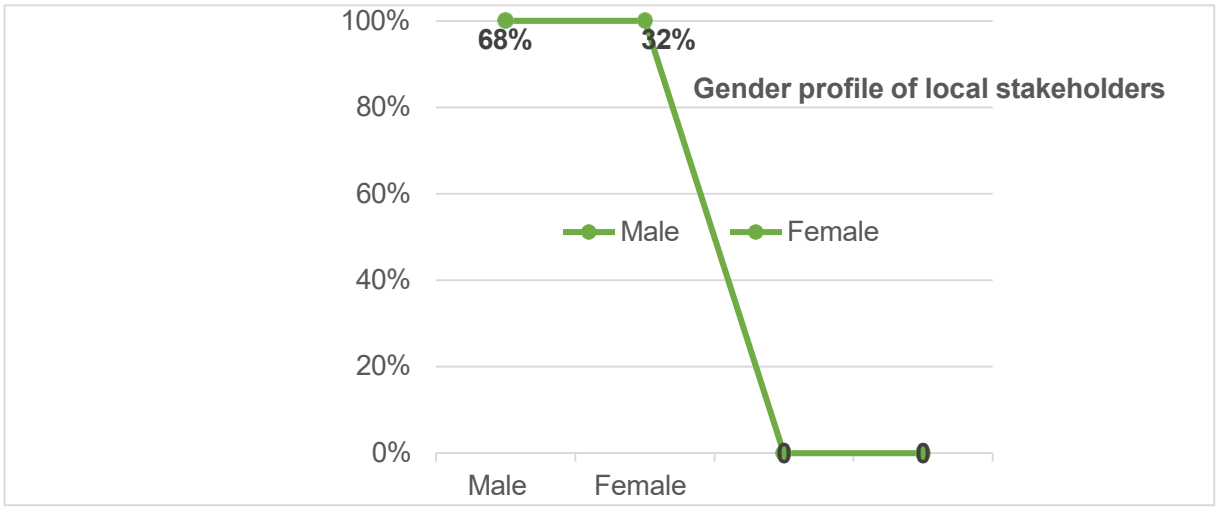


Figure 2. Gender of Local Research Participants (n=25)

The stacked line with markers above indicates that 68% (n=17) were male and 32% (n=8) were female participants. In this study, the majority of QRM participants were 68%(n=17), of whom were male, whereas 32%(n=8) were female participants. Thus, Figure 2 above shows that QRM was conquered by male local participants with just more than 36% (n=9) against female local participants.

3.1.2. Level of Local Stakeholders for Participation

The research participants were requested to indicate their level of local stakeholders in the HNTC LED initiatives. Figure 3 below presents the results of their level as local stakeholders (SMMEs & LCRPs) in the HNTC LED initiatives.

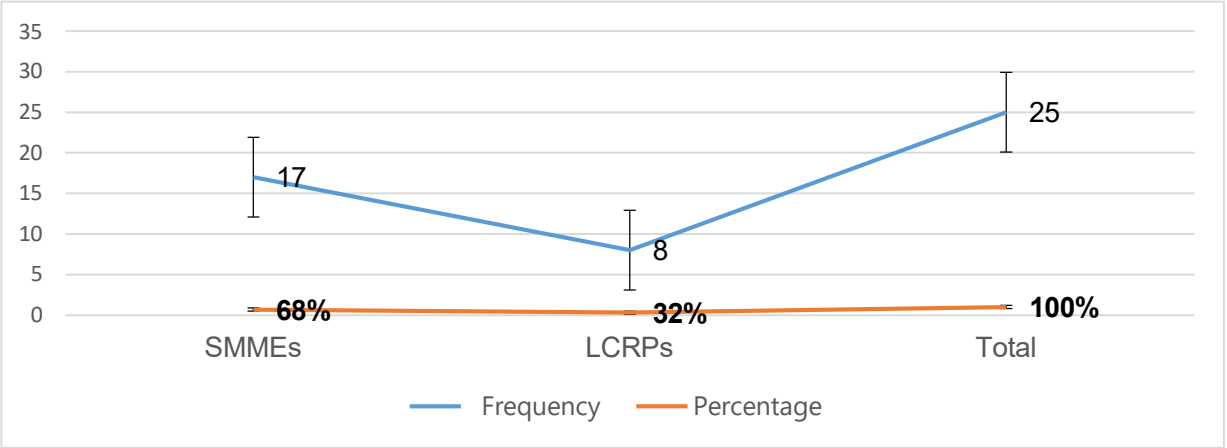


Figure 3. Level of Local Stakeholders Participation (n=25)

In line with Figure 3 above, 50% of the participants were SMMEs, while the LCRPs were also 50%. This indicates that there was a level of local representativeness and balance among the local stakeholders, which indicates that both were 50% equally represented.

3.1.3. The Understanding of LED as a Concept in HNTC by Local Stakeholders

Table 1 below indicates the understanding of stakeholders on LED as a concept for LGs. Therefore, in Table 1 below, the following were rated as 3 = (Yes), 2 = (No), and 1 = (Not sure). As such, Table 1 reveals the participants' understanding of aspects of stakeholders on LED as a concept, such as:

- The Constitution mandates LGs to play an important role in the socio-economic development of their local communities, which was 3 at 88%(n=22), 2 at 4% (n=1), and 1 at 8% (n=2).
- Stakeholders must have direct and indirect effects over a sustainable LED initiative in local areas of jurisdictions for LGs, which were 3 at 96% (n=24) and 1 at 4% (n=1).
- Stakeholders must recognise their important roles and responsibilities for effective LED initiatives, which were 3 at 92% (n=23) and 2 at 8% (n=2).
- There must be intervention strategies to deal with an effective LED initiative in LGs, which were 3 at 92% (n=23), 2 at 4% (n=1), and 1 at 4% (n=1).
- Relevant structures of stakeholders to manage the effectiveness of LED initiatives were 3 at 100% (n=25).

LGs (including HNTC) need to be involved and work in partnership with both internal and external stakeholders for the intervention strategies, which were (Yes = 3) at 93,6%, (No =2) at 1,6%, and (Not sure =1) at 4,8%. In this study, Table 1 revealed that the majority of participants, 93,6% (Yes), the minority, 1,6% (No), and those who were (Not sure), at 4,6%, indicated their understanding of aspects of the LED process in LGs.

Understanding of aspects of stakeholders on LED as a Concept in HNTC	3		2		1		Total %
	(n=25)	%	(n=25)	%	(n=25)	%	
Does the Constitution mandate LGs to play an important role in the socio-economic development of their local communities?	22	**88**	1	**4**	2	**8**	**100**
Do stakeholders have direct and indirect effects on a sustainable LED initiative in local areas of jurisdictions for LGs?	24	**96**	0	**0**	1	**4**	**100**
Do stakeholders need to recognise their important roles and responsibilities for effective LED initiatives?	23	**92**	0	**0**	1	**4**	**100**
Do you think that there must be intervention strategies to deal with for an effective LED initiative in LGs?	23	**92**	0	**0**	2	**8**	**100**
Do LGs need to be involved and work in partnership with both external and internal stakeholders for	23	**92**	1	**4**	1	**4**	**100**

intervention strategies on the effectiveness of LED initiatives?							

Table 1. Understanding aspects of the LED process (n=25)

Subsequently, this shows that the participants had a strong and excellent understanding at 93,6% in comparison with participants who were not sure or indicated no at 6,4%; that the various aspects of the LED process must be focused on the constitutional mandate of LGs on socio-economic development, a relevant structure of stakeholders (internal and external), the involvement and participation of internal and external stakeholders, the recognition of significant roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, and direct and indirect effects of a sustainable LED initiative by stakeholders.

3.1.4. Understanding and Knowledge of the Effective LED Intervention Strategies in HNTC

The table below indicates stakeholders' knowledge and understanding of intervention strategies for LED initiatives in HNTC. Therefore, in Table 2, the following are rated as 3 = (Yes), 2 = (No), and 1 = (Unknown).

Understanding of Aspects of Stakeholders on LEDS as a Concept at the HNTC	3		2		1		Total %
	(n=25)	%	(n=25)	%	(n=25)	%	
Does an intervention strategic approach need to include different stakeholders to effect LED initiatives?	24	**96**	0	**0**	1	**4**	**100**
Strategic assessment and environmental analysis are some of the main functions of LED initiatives.	23	**92**	1	**4**	1	**4**	**100**
Do LED intervention strategies need to speak to local community socio-economic conditions and challenges?	24	**96**	1	**4**	0	**0**	**100**
Is there a need for a relevant structure of stakeholders that should be involved in managing the effectiveness of LED initiatives in LGs?	25	**100**	0	**0**	0	**0**	**100**
Does the effectiveness of a sustainable LED initiative include assessment, planning of resources, implementing actions, monitoring and evaluating performance, and taking possible corrective measures?	22	**88**	1	**4**	2	**8**	**100**

Table 2. Knowledge and Understanding of LED Intervention Strategies (n=25)

Table 2 shows the participants' knowledge and understanding regarding the intervention strategies for LED that include:

- Different stakeholders were 3 at 96% (n=24) and 1 at 4% (n=1).
- Assessment and environment analysis were 3 at 92% (n=92), 2 at 4% (n=1), and 1 at 4% (n=1).
- LED initiatives must be appropriate to SCEs, and challenges for the local community were 3 at 96% (n=24) and 2 at 4% (n=1).
- Relevant structures of stakeholders to manage the effectiveness of LED initiatives, which were 3 at 100% (n=25).
- The effectiveness of sustainable LED initiatives must include assessment and environmental analysis, planning of actions, implementing actions, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), and taking of possible corrective measures, which were 3 at 88% (n=22), 2 at 4% (n=1), and 2 at 8% (n=2).

In this study, Table 2 above revealed that the majority of participants, at 82,5% (Yes), the minority at 10,5% (No), and those who were (Not sure) at 7%, indicated their knowledge and understanding regarding the intervention strategies for LED in LGs. In this study, Table 2 above disclosed that the majority of participants stood at (Yes) at 82,5%, the minority was (No) at 10,5%, and those who were (Not sure) at 7%, indicating that their knowledge and understanding regarding effective intervention strategies for LED initiatives in LGs.

3.2. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION

The results on gender indicated that the QRM was dominated by male local participants as represented by 68%, with just more than 36% (n=9) against female local participants at 32%. The research regarded the domination as being influenced by the fact that most of the SMMEs in the HNTC are owned by male entrepreneurs in comparison to female entrepreneurs, and the availability of LCRPs during data collection also influenced the process of gender participation.

However, the results on local stakeholders indicated a representativeness and balance amongst those who participated (for SMMEs and LCRPs), both at 50% to give a total of 100%. This indicates that there was an equal level of representativeness for the local stakeholders who participated (SMMEs & LCRPs) on an equal basis.

Subsequently, the results disclose that the participants have had a strong and excellent understanding at 93,6%, i.e. that the various aspects of the LED process must be focused on the constitutional mandate of LGs on socio-economic development; the relevant structure of stakeholders; involvement and participation of internal and external stakeholders; recognition of significant roles and responsibilities of stakeholders; direct and indirect effects over a sustainable LED initiative by stakeholders and the relevant structure of stakeholders, when compared to participants that were not sure or indicated no at 6,4%.

A review of documents such as the Office of the President (OP) (2021), OPM (2017), OPM (2011), and OP (2004) also indicated and explained the vibrant understanding, involvement of PPSs, and contribution by stakeholders as aspects that are desirable for the local development process. Kambule (2018) and Petrevska et al. (2016) assert that the concept of LED evolved as a policy approach in the early 1970s in response to local government's realisation that businesses and investments were moving to geographical locations where competitive advantages are optimal within an enabling economic environment.

By actively analysing a specific local economy, Ababio and Meyer (2012) assert that the local opportunities and obstacles to development are better understood by stakeholders, LGs, and local communities in that particular jurisdiction. Sekhampu (2010, as cited in Ababio & Meyer, 2012) indicates that with this new understanding of the local economy, strategies and policies could be formulated to address local challenges. The International Labour Organization (ILO) (2006, as cited in Ababio & Meyer, 2012) comments that LED could be utilised as a practical tool to find solutions to the threats or advantages of globalisation or localisation by maximising local resources and other potential aspects. Thus, Rogerson (2009, as cited in Ababio & Meyer, 2012) asserts that the challenge for LED initiatives is finding ways to optimise local resources and knowledge to benefit all residents in a specific geographical area.

This shows that among the stakeholders, there is a strong and excellent acknowledgment and understanding at 82,5% that the intervention strategies for effective LED initiatives must include different stakeholders, environment assessment and analysis, relevant structure of stakeholders, planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. The review of documents from the OP (2021), OPM (2017), and OPM (2011) revealed the vital role of participation by the local community and the involvement of PPS in local development aspects. Trousdale (2005, cited in Ababio & Meyer, 2012) emphasises that the concept of LED could, in broad terms, be defined and understood as all the economic actions and initiatives carried out by the members of a specific local community to achieve improved levels of quality of life, with a focus on the poor to create sustainable and resilient local economies.

4. CONCLUSION

Built upon the research discoveries above, the researchers make the following recommendations: the external and internal stakeholders in the LED process must come together and form a broad stakeholder forum (BSF) including the HNTC, OhRC, CBOs, the Namibia Chamber of Commerce and Industries (NCCI), as well as the Ministry of Urban and Rural Development (MURD). They can then establish partnerships to afford various levels of understanding and knowledge on the intervention strategies for LED initiatives, innovation, and management, as well as reviewing updated national policies (OPM, 2011; MURD, 2012, etc.) on LEDs.

The understanding and knowledgeable aspects highlighted by local stakeholders for the effective functionality of LED initiatives at HNTC as an LG must focus on improving the SECs and maintaining the QLLC across all local communities by reviewing and updating policies on LED aspects. Integrating the understanding and knowledge of sustainable LED practices requires updating policies into the core processes and services through the assessment of local areas that can support local economic prosperity while improving the SECs, maintaining the QLLC, and protecting the environment.

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