Implementing the Poverty Reduction Strategy and Action Plan: What have we achieved?

By Dr Thula Sizwe Dlamini

The urgency of improving peoples’ livelihoods and eradicating poverty in Swaziland is very real and is always at the heart of His Majesty King Mswati III’s speeches. In a recent speech, the King pleaded with Swazi’s to “make a positive contribution, and stop being lazy.”

The negativity and indolence masks the actual progress that the country has made in the last 19 years or since 1997, the first year in which the National Development Strategy (NDS), a 25-year strategy capturing the development aspirations of the Swazi Nation, became operational. It also clouds the development agenda.

It is, perhaps, the magnitude and scale of poverty and inequality in the economy that is responsible for the scepticism. Poverty levels remain very high at 63% and tend to affect rural household (73%) than urban households (31%). Similarly, 54.3% of males compared to 45.7% of females in Swaziland lived below the national poverty line of E463.00 per month, in 2010.

These glaring discrepancies in the economy are on the radar of government, who is working diligently to ensure that poverty becomes a thing of the past in the Kingdom by 2022. The Poverty Reduction Strategy and Action Plan (PRSAP) is the government’s core line of attack for eradicating poverty: it prioritises poverty reduction in the NDS.

At its heart is the drive to facilitate Swazi’s to produce their way out of poverty. It puts agriculture development and investments into pro-poor infrastructural projects at the heart of poverty eradication in Swaziland. It is predicated on agriculture being the foundation of industry and commerce.

Many have underscored that the country’s poverty reduction strategy while appealing in theory, has not moved from the periphery to the core of each constituency’s actions. For example, it has been mentioned that the PRSAP has remained largely in Siphofaneni so much that the country’s challenge as it enters the last five years of the NDS is chiefly implementation.

Those who argue that the strategy is yet to declare dividends to the country always point to the drought-stricken countryside, in constituencies such as Mpolonjeni,
Nkilongo, Lubulini, Somntongo and Matsanjeni South to mention just a few, as proof that the strategy is not yielding enough benefits for the poor.

Very little is being said of the progress that has been made in Siphofaneni, let alone the magnitude of development that the Swaziland Water and Agricultural Development Enterprise (SWADE) has helped inspire in the constituency since 2009.

It is not difficult to imagine why: it is easy to appraise than to implement.

So what has the PRSAP achieved in Siphofaneni? What does the evidence suggest on the ground? While there are no studies and certainly surveys that have been undertaken to quantify and illustrate the benefits that have accrued to households in the area, anecdotal evidence suggests that the constituency has made tremendous progress.

What used to be a single shopping complex is now the centre of the little town of Siphofaneni which now boasts two banks, one development finance institution, a mini shopping mall, agricultural input providers, and a variety of other service providers who were not present prior to the implementation of the PRSAP.

These enterprises employ a significant proportion of the population of the area. They also import skills from other constituencies in the country.

Compared with the Siphofaneni of 2007 (population and housing census data) where households were largely built in stick, stone, and mud. The Siphofaneni of 2016 is littered with spacious houses that compare very well with some of the houses found in some of the major towns in the country. The people own a multiplicity of assets that make life more bearable: cars, smartphones, televisions, refrigerators full of food, and stoves etc.

Secondly, Siphofaneni has become an important commercial centre in the Lubombo region and challenges many of the towns in the region when it comes to the speed and level of development. Thirdly, Siphofaneni has shown that getting rural households into productive economic activities is the easiest way of expanding government revenue sources. The farmer enterprises in Siphofaneni contribute towards the fiscus through paying tax. These farmers have a different perspective to taxation – and could teach many about the importance of paying tax.

Lastly, the constituency is moving into unchartered development territories in Swaziland. New ways of delivering development within the Tinkhundla system of governance are being developed, stressed-checked, refined, and implemented.

There is no doubt that Siphofaneni is bringing to Swaziland the much-needed development implementation knowledge that has been lacking in the economy all
along. The enrolment rates at schools in the area have gone up as many children now have access to the basic elements. One looks forward to the 2017 Population and Housing Census to get a clearer picture of the level of development that has taken place in Siphofaneni – for now, the anecdotal evidence suggests that the implementation of the PRSAP is yet another success story for the government.

Of course, success is relative. And as is widely known in development economics, anthropology, and archaeology, social development is always a victim of its own success. The progress that has been achieved in Siphofaneni is now a reference point of where development in other constituencies should go.

A focus on robust implementation of the PRSAP to cover other constituencies of the economy is therefore needed. The first point of call is understanding what has worked. While success in Siphofaneni may have been a combination of already available stock of knowledge in the constituency (good soils, long history of trial and area, and a great desire for households to get out of poverty and experience economic freedom in their lifetimes) and hard work amongst the government, its implementing agency (SWADE) and development partners; the role of traditional leaders and households and their willingness to not stand in the way of development is commendable and should be encouraged and replicated throughout the country.

Chieftaincy disputes have derailed and to a larger extent delayed the implementation of the country’s development vision. Yet at Siphofaneni, it is clear that SWADE has come up with a blend of techniques to deal with these and many other problems at the community level. More studies are required to generate the stock of knowledge needed to inform plans and strategies to ensure the full implementation of the PRSAP in other constituencies.

A critical component for the full implementation of the PRSAP is the country’s revised NDS which has just been made stronger by the UN 2030 Agenda and AU 2063 Agenda. The revised NDS puts agriculture development at the centre of driving rural growth. The plan involves commercialising the activities of smallholder farmers, increasing market access, and ensuring that they have access to technology.

Decisions taken by each region, and certainly constituency, as it conducts PRSAP implementation planning require that such consider the broader national agenda for development. A break away from the previous approach to development where constituencies and regions worked in silos should be encouraged at all levels.

While some of the home grown strategies of fostering development that have been developed at LUSIP are yet to be disseminated in the country, constituencies serious about development may be able to draw lessons by merely visiting the LUSIP area and seeing first-hand what has been achieved.
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