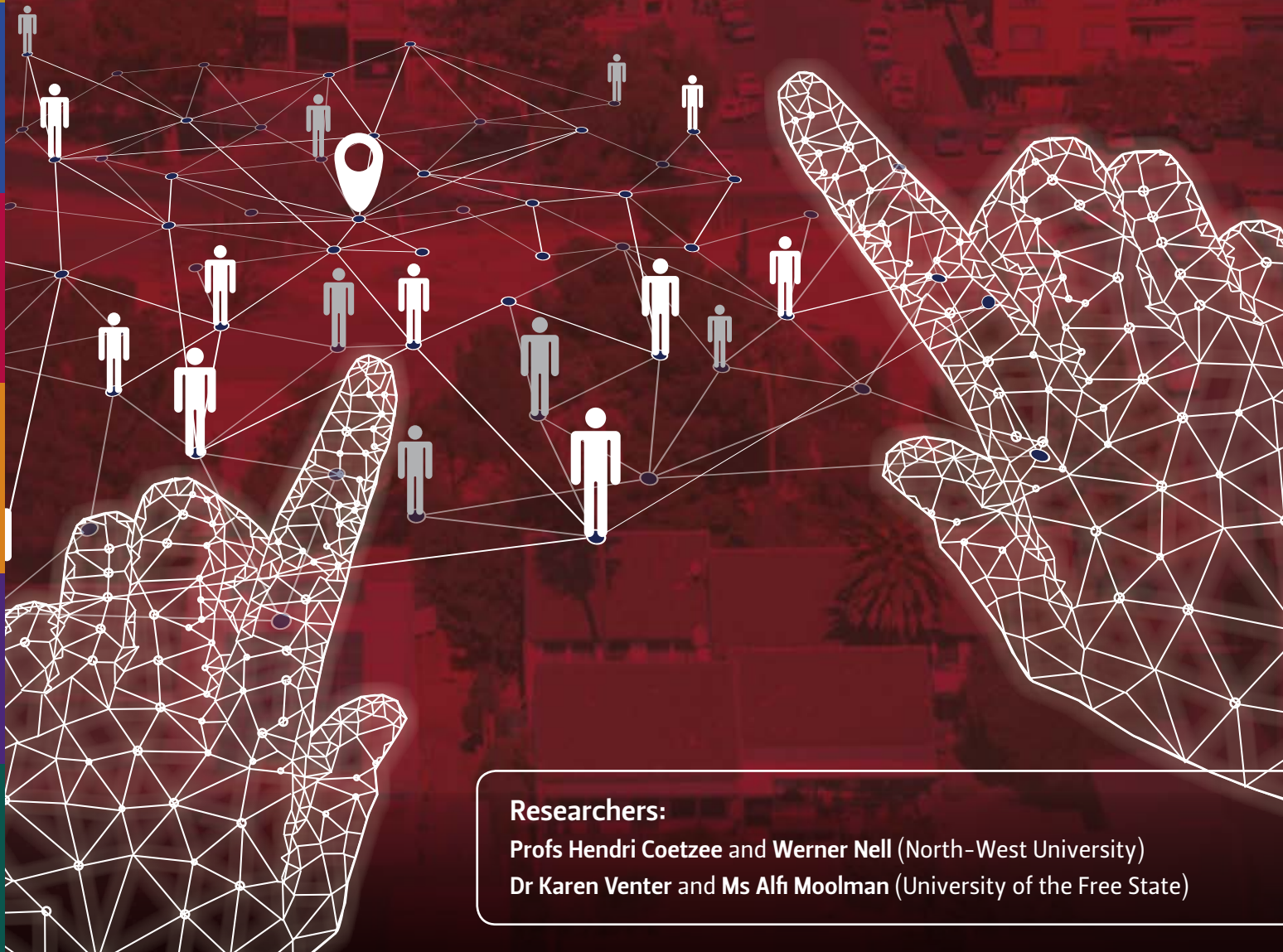


Community deficits and strengths in the University of the Free State's local communities:

a qualitative baseline study and guide
for future engaged scholarship activities



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Introduction

This report presents the findings of a qualitative study conducted between January and March 2022 by researchers from the North-West University (NWU) and the University of the Free State (UFS) in the three communities where most of the UFS' engaged scholarship activities are implemented, namely Qwaqwa, the Greater Mangaung (e.g. Botshabelo, Thaba Nchu, and Bloemfontein), and Trompsburg. More specifically, the study set out to explore the most pressing community deficits (needs and challenges) and available community strengths (assets and resources), with the eventual aim of guiding the UFS' engaged scholarship strategy and acting as a baseline study for future monitoring and evaluation purposes.

Local communities in South Africa have many deficits (McGhie and Keim, 2017). Communities in the Free State are no different. According to the latest available community census (Stats-SA, 2016) and a report published in 2018 by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank), the majority of South Africans living in the Free State can be classified as financially impoverished, unemployed, and subject to less than desirable material living conditions. In addition, the overall impact of these challenges has also been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences (Posel, Oyenubi and Kallomparambill, 2021). Many local communities in the Free State (as well as in most other parts of South Africa) are therefore in dire need of various forms of assistance.

By focusing on their core business of engaged scholarship, universities such as the UFS could potentially assist local communities in documenting their most pressing deficits in a systematic and scientific manner. These findings can subsequently be shared with the government and other partners who are willing and able to assist these communities. Furthermore, engaged scholarship activities can be used to find solutions to community deficits, which in turn can lead to innovative services, products, and processes that local communities can use to address their needs. Such partnerships can be beneficial to both local communities and universities. In addition, universities could apply existing knowledge to support members of local communities on how to overcome their deficits via the transfer of specific skills and knowledge. Lastly, as the proverbial keepers of knowledge, the expertise that exists in universities among staff and students can be shared with local communities via engaged scholarship in a bid to support community development and/or well-being.

However, before a university such as the UFS can make a meaningful impact in its local communities, it must first be determined what the prevailing needs are in its local communities. In principle, this could be done by means of a document study, which comprises a thorough review of up-to-date and reliable literature. Unfortunately, however, there are very few published community studies in which researchers have focused specifically on the deficits of communities in the Free State. Moreover, no published academic studies could be located that focus specifically on the three selected communities. The only available evidence that could be identified, consisted of ad hoc, mostly outdated reports and media coverage on some of the general needs and challenges in communities in the Free State. For example, Puukka et al. (2012) identified various needs and challenges related to health, welfare, and education; Malakoane et al. (2020) identified several health-related issues, as did Machoari (2021), whose health-related research focused specifically on human resources. More holistic work in the community deficit space was conducted by Coetzee and Nell (2021) in parts of the North West (one of the Free State's neighbouring provinces). These reports and studies could potentially provide some indication of the general needs and challenges in local communities, but experience has shown that community needs tend to be context specific. In other words, although the need for employment, improved housing, education, and health is experienced to a greater or lesser extent by most communities in South Africa, the priorities often differ between communities. It is thus evident that existing non-empirical and anecdotal literature on the topic would not suffice. An empirical study in the context of the UFS' communities is therefore called for in order to clarify the assets and deficits that prevail in these areas.

Community deficits (such as needs and challenges) can be assessed via a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods methodological approach (Community toolbox, 2022) and from many different theoretical perspectives (Sirgy et al., 2010). Quantitative approaches (e.g. via a cross-sectional design, survey, questionnaire, etc.) generally provide the most accurate and generalisable data, but tend to be very time-consuming and expensive (Creswell, 2014). In addition, to verify and quantify community challenges and needs, baseline data is typically required in order to inform the development of a structured questionnaire. As was indicated earlier, this is unfortunately not a viable option in the context of the present study, given that so little context-specific information is available for the three selected communities. In addition, from an ethical perspective, although the research was planned to take place during lower levels of COVID-19 restrictions, it was still deemed unsafe and potentially risky to send large teams of fieldworkers into local communities to collect data.

In light of these constraints, a more feasible option was to conduct a qualitative study (Creswell, 2013), during which key informants were purposively selected to assist the researchers in the identification of community challenges and needs. With such an approach, specific challenges were identified by community members, based on their personal, subjective experiences and knowledge of living in their communities. They were also used to identify other important role players within their respective communities via a process referred to as snowball sampling (Tracy, 2013). Subsequent interviews were then conducted, until a point of data saturation was reached (which occurs when several sequential interviews yield no significant new results) (Tracy, 2013).

Finally, national and international research reveal that community interventions should not only focus on community deficits but should also include and draw on community strengths. This is because a significant number of needs and challenges could potentially be addressed by a community leveraging its own assets and resources. Unfortunately, many communities fail to realise that they possess these strengths. Consequently, a very important part of developing an engaged scholarship strategy for the UFS will be to identify communal assets, which will pave the way for the UFS to intervene in a focused, impactful, and sustainable manner.

Methodology

Approach and research design

The researchers followed a qualitative approach (Sarantakos, 2013) to identify and explore the most pressing deficits and available strengths in the three selected local communities. As indicated earlier, this option was selected, given that comparatively little is known about these communities, and the researchers wished to explore the conditions prevailing in these communities from an emic perspective, with a minimum number of preconceived notions. A qualitative methodology enabled researchers to capture the subjectively experienced reality of participants (Tracy, 2013). This is particularly important in the context of community engagement, where any proposed interventions need to articulate with context-specific and experienced community needs and challenges. Within the overall qualitative framework, a qualitative multiple case study design (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2013; 2014) was employed, which involves the study of a number of bounded systems. In the context of the present study, these bounded systems took the form of the three selected communities where the UFS implements most of its engaged scholarship activities. This approach allows for a so-called 'thick description' to be obtained of the unique context of each of the three communities and the generation of nuanced case-related themes. Multiple case studies represent the class of cases better, and also allow for comparisons between cases, which typically results in greater breadth and depth of analysis (Rule & Vaughn, 2011). This strategy is based on an interpretivist paradigm, which also forms the epistemological underpinning of the study.

Study areas

The study was conducted in three pre-selected communities in the Free State province of South Africa. The rationale for selecting these three communities was that the UFS implements most of its engaged scholarship activities in these communities (or plans to do so in the future). As is evident in Figure 1, the Greater Mangaung community (e.g. Bloemfontein, Thaba Nchu, and Botshabelo) is where the UFS' main campus is based. The Qwaqwa community (of which Phuthaditjhaba is the central business district) is located 320 km to the west of Mangaung, while Trompsburg is located 120 km south of Bloemfontein. More details about each community are provided in the prelude to each of the case studies.



Figure 1: Map of study areas

Participants and sampling

A purposive sampling strategy, augmented by snowball sampling (Tracy, 2013), was used to select the 25 participants who took part in the study. All the participants (who were all over the age of 18) were selected based on their experiences as long-standing (10+ years) and active members of their respective communities. Many of them occupy/occupied central leadership roles in the communities as educational, social, religious, political, or traditional leaders, or otherwise represent one of a number of local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the area. More information about the participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant profile

Interview	Gender	Community	Participant description
1	Male	Qwaqwa	Religious leader/ NGO
2	Male	Qwaqwa	Religious leader (bishop)
3	Male	Qwaqwa	Educational leader (school principal)
4	Male	Qwaqwa	Ward councillor
5	Male	Qwaqwa	Social worker
6	Female	Qwaqwa	Entrepreneur/ businesswoman
7	Male	Greater Mangaung	Manager of youth centre
8	Female	Greater Mangaung	Representative of a local community radio station
9	Female	Greater Mangaung	Community member/ involved in eco-village project and other projects in the area
10	Female	Greater Mangaung	Traditional and political leader
11	Male	Greater Mangaung	Former school principal in Heide part of the community
12	Male	Greater Mangaung	NGO leader
13	Female	Greater Mangaung	Health professional
14	Male	Greater Mangaung	Political leader/ ward councillor
15	Female	Greater Mangaung	Business leader (President of Mangaung Chamber of Commerce and Industry)
16	Female	Greater Mangaung	Social/ child welfare
17	Male	Greater Mangaung	Religious leader
18	Male	Trompsburg	Local business owner
19	Male	Trompsburg	Medical professional
20	Male	Trompsburg	Religious leader
21	Male	Trompsburg	Educational leader
22	Male	Trompsburg	Political leader/ community activist
23	Male	Trompsburg	Traditional medicine practitioner
24	Female	Trompsburg	Centre manager and resident community member (UFS)
25	Male	Trompsburg	Community activist/ religious leader

Data collection

Semi-structured individual interviews were used to gather data over a one-week period between the end of January and the beginning of February 2022. The first interview was conducted jointly by three of the four researchers (to ensure that they all followed the same protocol in subsequent interviews), and the remaining interviews were then conducted either individually or in teams of two researchers. Each interview started with an open question: "Please tell us/ me a bit more about your community." Depending on the participants' responses, they were then asked to specifically identify the biggest challenges and needs in their communities. Participants were also asked to identify needs related to their occupations and the specific domains of community life that they represented, for example education, health, etc. Finally, participants were asked to identify the assets and resources in their communities. All interviews were digitally audio-recorded with the permission of the participants. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes.

The interviews were further supplemented by observational and visual documentation methods as described by Denzin and Lincoln (2000). Photos were taken in the community to document structures, conditions, regions, etc., pointed out by participants as indicative or emblematic of community deficits and strengths.

Theoretical saturation (Tracy, 2013) was achieved around the 20th interview, but five additional interviews were conducted to confirm that this was indeed the case.

Data analysis

Data derived from the individual interviews and photographs were analysed using thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Tracy (2013). This process involves identifying recurring themes in the data via a systematic process of coding and consolidating emerging trends in the interviews and photographs.

Procedure and ethical considerations

Participants were sourced and recruited by one of the researchers (who has been working in the three communities for many years) a week before the fieldwork started. In most cases, the participants received the informed consent form before the team met them, or otherwise before the interview was conducted. The informed consent form, which was discussed with all the participants before each interview, included basic information about the study, what their participation would involve, as well as more detailed information about the ethical aspects related to the study (e.g. the voluntary nature of the study, and matters pertaining to confidentiality, benefits, potential risks/remedies, data management, etc.) as described in the ethical guidelines and principles of the international Singapore Statement on Research Integrity (2010) and the ethical guidelines of the National Health Research Ethics Council. The informed consent form also included specific questions and safety protocols related to COVID-19. Participants who provided their informed and signed consent were subsequently interviewed. All prescribed COVID-19 safety protocols were adhered to during the interviews.

Findings

In this section, each community is first described individually in the form of a case description, followed by an outline of the themes generated from the data in relation to community deficits and strengths. Finally, the central or recurring themes in the cases (the different communities) are then discussed integratively, with the aim of indicating a general focus and direction for the UFS' engaged scholarship strategy.

Qwaqwa community

Qwaqwa is a former 'homeland' area in the central eastern part of the Free State, bordering Lesotho. It is located in close proximity to two smaller towns, Harrismith and Kestell (which are outside the scope of the study). The community can be characterised as peri-urban to rural, with several small to medium-sized villages scattered over a large geographical area. It also contains a more industrialised area and a central business district (known as Phuthaditjhaba) where a large new mall and various shopping complexes are available. As a result, community members do not need to travel to larger cities such as Bloemfontein to obtain more specialised goods and services. Observational data confirmed that most of the typical goods and services that people need to survive are readily available in the community, especially in and around the Phuthaditjhaba area. Unfortunately, however, unemployment is rife in the region. The community is composed almost entirely of Sesotho-speaking African residents (Stats-SA 2016). The UFS has a campus in Qwaqwa and many UFS students undergo part of their training and/or provide professional services in this community.



Figure 2: Qwaqwa community

Community deficits

Six deficit-related themes emerged from the data: unemployment, poverty, and the need for work; issues related to government services, infrastructure, and housing; safety, security, and crime-related issues; food security challenges; as well as certain educational and social challenges and the needs that stem from it.

Unemployment, poverty, and the need for work

The very first deficit that all the participants mentioned during their interviews is the very high unemployment rate in the area. As a result, the need for employment is currently the most pressing concern of everyone in the community. Among those who have been able to secure employment in Qwaqwa, a number are employed by the government, as participant one confirmed: “Government ... the Department of Education, is basically the largest employer in the area.” (Interview #1). Others are employed by local industries/manufacturing (or what is left of it) and the retail sector (which comprises mainly the new mall and shopping centres in Phuthaditjhaba). In addition, according to one of the participants, there are a couple of new companies/retailers moving into the area, which could potentially stimulate the creation of new job opportunities, especially in the construction sector. In his own words: “It is an opportunity actually. We have land here. Companies are coming here ... they just employ people around here. Mainly in construction.” (Interview #4).

Due to the high rate of unemployment, most community members rely on government grants as a basic source of income. This was confirmed during the fieldwork phase of the study when many community members were observed at Sassa pay points.

In addition, some community members also try to generate an income or supplement their basic income (e.g. social grants) through entrepreneurial activities such as running small spaza shops or taverns, selling fruit and vegetables (which they grow in their backyards), washing cars, etc. (Figures 3 and 5).



Figure 3: Local community members generating or supplementing an income via small business

Another very prominent sub-theme centres on the fact that many of the working-age community members, especially those with good qualifications, are forced to look for employment outside of their own community due to the lack of internal employment opportunities. Many of them work in the larger cities in the Free State, such as Bloemfontein, or in cities in Gauteng. As will be discussed later, the current primary education system and the lack of support from parents, grandparents, and family members to school-going children also seem to play a role in this complex situation.

Finally, it would appear that a lack of suitable qualifications is not always the problem when it comes to obtaining gainful employment. According to several participants, there are many members of their communities who have graduate and even postgraduate qualifications, but who still cannot find a job within their community or in the surrounding regions.

Government-related services, infrastructure, and housing

The second most prominent theme that emerged from the interviews was the lack of basic government services and infrastructure-related problems, and as a result, the need for improved service delivery, government-related services, and infrastructure. Four very prominent subthemes emerged. Firstly, according to the participants, many parts of their community struggle without water and are often forced to go without sufficient water supply for days or even weeks. What is ironic, according to the participants, is that several dams and other water-related infrastructure are available in the area, but in most cases are not functional.

Secondly, many regions within the community frequently endure prolonged electrical outages. According to one of the participants, this is not only because of load shedding, but “current infrastructure provided by the municipality is not sufficient or overloaded because of illegal connections”. (Interview #2). There are also allegations that “the previous political regime sabotaged an electrical substation when they were kicked out by a new political party”. (Interview #4).

Thirdly, as is evident in Figure 4, local roads – especially in the more rural villages – are full of potholes, making it difficult for local community members to move around. Furthermore, these potholes also regularly cause damage to vehicles. Another road-related challenge is that many of the secondary roads are untarred and very difficult to navigate, especially during times of severe rain, when the road surface turns into a muddy sludge. Participant 1 felt particularly strongly about this issue in the community: “Look here. Look at the state of these roads. You can almost not drive here and if you do it will damage your car. The taxis do not want to drive here” (Interview #1).



Figure 4: Unmaintained, dilapidated or lack of infrastructure in the Qwaqwa community

Finally, participants also indicated that some of the formal and many of the informal housing structures are frequently damaged during the rainy season, often leaving local community members without a roof over their heads.

Safety, security, and crime

The third most prominent theme that emerged in Qwaqwa is the high levels of crime that members of the community are said to experience on a near-daily basis. According to participants, such crimes mostly take the form of robbery, housebreaking, and stealing food. Some of the local schools are apparently also vandalised from time to time (especially during school holidays when there is no one present to look after the school). However, a recent awareness campaign by the Department of Education seems to have led to a decrease in the number of vandalism incidents at local schools.

According to many of the participants, the elevated levels of crime are driven by the high number of unemployed youths. This was underscored by one of the participants (Interview #2) who explained it as follows: “There is a lot of tsotsi¹ around here ... you can see them standing on the corner where you came in ... and at the end of the day they want to survive ... housebreaking is the main problem, cable theft.” (Interview #2). Some of the participants also link crime to some of the traditional cultural practices in the area. This was confirmed by one of the participants who explained: “It is mostly boys. When they get back from these schools (traditional initiation schools) they often get involved in crime.” (Interview #1). Participant one continued to note that this situation apparently also affects the relationship between young boys and local teachers: “... when they get back from these schools, they do not want to cooperate with the teachers”. (Interview #1). Another participant linked the association between crime and the youth with gangsterism: “Currently, there is an issue with gangsterism which is really growing here in Qwaqwa ... it is one of the challenges that we are facing daily here in Qwaqwa” (Interview #4). According to the same participant, the phenomenon started about three years ago and is becoming a big problem, especially among school dropouts. He also indicated that gang members are often involved in alcohol abuse as well as the illicit use and sale of drugs, attributing these circumstances to dysfunctional family structures and poverty.

Food insecurity

As mentioned earlier, many people in this community are unemployed and financially impoverished and therefore rely mostly on government for grants to survive. However, the money they receive from the government is in most cases not sufficient to address basic needs. This is compounded by the fact that these funds are often used to buy alcohol rather than the necessities of life, resulting in a degree of food insecurity. As a result, a significant number of community members, many of whom previously worked on farms, started growing their own fruit and vegetables (figure 5) to sustain themselves.



Figure 5: Local community members growing fruit and vegetables in their backyards

According to participants from local NGOs and schools, younger children appear to be most affected by the lack of availability of adequate food in their households. During the school term, children receive food at their schools, but during weekends and holidays many of these children reportedly go hungry. As a result, many local NGOs such as the Agape Foundation and several churches have soup kitchens that each feed up to 150 children between two and five days per week with food mostly donated by corporate sponsors.

1. A young urban criminal, especially one from a township area.

Educational challenges

Observational data confirm the presence of a number of local schools in the area. This was verified during interviews with the participants. What is also evident is that most of the schools are very well maintained. There are, however, a couple of educational challenges in the community. According to one of the participants: “Many children do not get the after-school support they need from parents.” (Interview #3). The view of one of the educational specialists in the area is that this is mainly because many parents are not serious about their children’s education. As discussed earlier, many parents also do not work in the community but in larger cities such as Bloemfontein, and others in Gauteng. As a result, a lot of school-going children are left in the care of their grandparents or family members so that they can attend a school in the area. Many of these caretakers, especially grandparents, are uneducated and are therefore unable to provide the type of support that learners need to help them do and understand their schoolwork, especially in the case of maths and science. As a further consequence, some children in the community drop out of school before they matriculate, which adversely affects their employability. According to one of the participants: “the youth with no matric is particularly hopeless”. (Interview #1). In a bid to address this challenge, NGOs such as the Agape Foundation provide after-school support services to the children of neighbouring schools to overcome some of the educational and social-related challenges in these areas.

Social challenges

Many of the participants were of the opinion that the pay-out of government grants is fuelling social challenges in the area, such as the abuse of various substances – and linked to it, the abuse of women and children: “You know, our government tried to relieve people with the R350 grant ... but immediately when they get it, they think about going to a tavern. They just go and booze and booze all the way.” (Interview #2).

Observations also confirmed the presence of multiple taverns in parts of the community. According to some of the participants, community members regularly engage in drinking activities for coping and recreational purposes, which often lead to domestic violence and the abuse of women and children, as well as conflict among some of the community members (Interview #1). According to the same participant: “alcohol is mostly consumed ... the presence of illicit drugs such as nyaope has not made its way yet to the more remote villages”. The presence and use of nyaope has, however, been confirmed in areas such as Phuthaditjhaba, and has been seen to be fuelled in part by government grants.

Another challenge is the high level of teenage pregnancy. A couple of local NGOs in the area are in the process of implementing awareness and educational programmes to combat the problem.

Community strengths

In general, residents are fairly satisfied with health, education, religious, consumer, and transport-related services in their community. Four strength-related themes emerged during the interviews with Qwaqwa residents: a strong sense of community and cooperation among members of the community, a new political regime (party), existing (unused) infrastructure, and other opportunities associated with educational levels and nature-based resources.

Sense of community

One of the most prominent community strengths in Qwaqwa is the strong sense of community and cooperation that exists among members of the community. This is exemplified in instances where people have offered their time and labour to fix roads or to clean sidewalks in front of their homesteads. According to the participants, people also support each other with food and even money, especially in the context of important cultural events such as weddings and funerals.

New political regime

The second most prominent strength identified by the participants is the establishment of a new local political party that calls itself 'Map-16'. The party was apparently established by a group of local councillors who were unhappy about the way the community was managed by the previous political party and were deeply dissatisfied with the high levels of corruption that characterised this party in their view. Participants felt that the new political party in the area is giving hope to many members of the community who believe that they will now (hopefully) get access to services and additional support from government, which were previously lacking or inadequate.

Existing (unused) infrastructure

Another very prominent community strength is the availability of infrastructure in the community. This mostly includes government buildings and small to medium enterprises and manufacturing-related infrastructure such as the Matsikeng industrial hives (Figure 6), which were originally developed to stimulate economic growth in the area and to create jobs. Unfortunately, most of this infrastructure is no longer in operation, and many structures are in a dilapidated state. This was confirmed by one of the participants: "There are industries on the industrial side, but you will find out that most of those industries are empty ... they are no longer working." (Interview #1). Some of the participants attributed this to factors such as the high rent and corruption. Despite this, most of these structures might serve as latent assets and could potentially be repurposed to serve a variety of community needs.



Figure 6: Unused infrastructure

Other opportunities

Perhaps unexpectedly, educational levels in the community were found to be high compared to many other communities, such as the other two communities included in this study, as well as comparative communities in the North-West province. As such, if the right conditions could be created to accommodate the skilled labour in the region, it might lead to additional employment in the community (see discussion and recommendations).

Participants often commented on the natural beauty of the mountains in the area and suggested that tourism opportunities should be explored. According to one of the participants, there is a big seasonal influx of people to the area (people working in other areas), which could potentially create new

opportunities for the community. Observations indicated that there is a tourism office in the area, but it appears to be dilapidated (see Figure 7). If this avenue is explored, it could also lead to additional jobs and other opportunities in the community.



Figure 7: Tourism office in Qwaqwa

Lastly, the researchers were also informed about efforts by the community to turn dumpsites into parks for recreational purposes. According to the participants, their plans are already in an advanced stage of development. They also have the support of a number of local stakeholders but need to secure funding for the project. Their plan is to rehabilitate at least one such area in the near future as part of a pilot project.

Greater Mangaung community

The Greater Mangaung community is made up of three sections: Bloemfontein, Botshabelo, and Thaba Nchu. (The metro actually consists of seven administration sections, but four of them fall outside the scope of the study.) As can be observed in Figure 1, the community is spread over a large metropolitan area and is situated in the central part of the Free State.



Figure 8: Bloemfontein area (Source: *The Citizen*)

The Bloemfontein section (Figure 8) is made up of mostly black African Sesotho-speaking residents (86%), followed by white community members (11%) and coloured community members (4%) (Stats-

SA, 2016). As such, it is also the most cosmopolitan, heterogeneous, and culturally diverse section in the larger community. Bloemfontein as a city is further divided into northern and southern areas/suburbs. Some of the less financially prosperous areas are located in the southern parts, and include the city centre, Heidedal, and informal settlements. Observations indicate that most of the typical goods and services that people need to survive are available in the community (in most areas), including all government-related services and business-related services.

The Botshabelo section (Figure 9), on the other hand, was established in the late 1960s by the ruling apartheid government. It is located 17 kilometres from Thaba 'Nchu and approximately 55 kilometres from Bloemfontein. People living in this section of the broader community are almost entirely African black/Sesotho-speaking (Stats-SA, 2016). Most community members reside in a formal dwelling that they own, and reportedly have access to all basic government services. Almost half of all Botshabelo residents is unemployed. Many of those who do have jobs work outside of the community, mostly in Bloemfontein, and commute to and from work on a daily basis. Basic goods and services that people need to survive are available in the community, including government and business-related services.



Figure 9: Botshabelo community (Source: BluGnu)

Finally, the Thaba Nchu community (Figure 10) was established in the 1830s by a Barolong chief called Moroka. The area is mostly rural and consists of 42 villages, which historically formed part of Bophuthatswana. The community differs ethnically from the other communities in the sense that it is mostly made up of African black/Setswana-speaking people (Stats-SA, 2016). Basic goods and services that people need to survive are available in the community, including government and business-related services. These are, however, fairly limited compared to Bloemfontein, necessitating frequent travel to Bloemfontein for many residents, as a wider range of services are available there.



Figure 10: Thaba 'Nchu community (Source: Wikipedia)

Community deficits

The fact that the broader Mangaung community is so large, diverse, and spread over a large geographical area, makes it very difficult to identify specific community-level needs. In a sense, the typical challenges and issues associated with cities, such as unemployment, deteriorating inner-city areas, crime, etc., can be expected in the city of Bloemfontein. However, one of the most prominent area-specific needs that has emerged revolves around water. Residents in many parts of Bloemfontein, even the more affluent areas, often have to survive for days or even weeks without running water. In some parts of the community, members have their own boreholes, but in most cases community members must buy water or rely on local municipalities to deliver water to them in mobile tanks. According to two of the participants, a contributing factor is the fact that many municipal areas do not pay for the water they get from Bloemwater, which puts them in a difficult financial position. This hampers any new developments for the area and makes it very difficult to continue to provide basic services in the area.

What is also very evident in the Bloemfontein area specifically, is the huge discrepancy between the more affluent areas compared to the lower income areas. Heidedal (Figure 11) is a typical example of one of the lower income areas where additional needs and challenges exist, such as higher levels of unemployment (and the consequent need for jobs), high levels of crime, a lack of service delivery and infrastructure, generally low levels of education, and single-parent-headed households/ the absence of fathers. In contrast, other areas such as Pellissier appear to be stable, organised, and well-functioning.

What is also very evident is the fact that many people from areas such as Botshabelo, Thaba Nchu, and Trompsburg commute daily to and from Bloemfontein for work. Other residents live in Bloemfontein and then commute to work in other towns on a daily basis. Yet other people, for example members of the Qwaqwa community, live and work in Bloemfontein on a semi-permanent basis, only travelling back to their home communities during holidays or when they are not working.

In addition to the above scenario, the participants also identified six main deficits: unemployment, poverty, and the need for work; safety, security, and crime; government-related services and infrastructure; educational challenges; social challenges; and cost of transport.



Figure 11: Scene in lower income areas of Heidedal, Bloemfontein (Source: Bloemfontein Courant)

Unemployment, poverty, and the need for work

Even though there are more job opportunities in the city of Bloemfontein than in the other communities that were explored, for example, in the educational, health, corporate, and military sectors, some participants – especially in areas such as Heidedal – pointed towards unemployment as a growing concern. In fact, the most prominent deficit-related theme mentioned by all the participants in this community is the extremely high level of unemployment and the concomitant need for jobs. As a result, most community members in Heidedal rely on government grants as a basic source of income. Furthermore, as will be discussed later, most households are headed by single mothers who do not get the financial support they need from their partners. This situation places a lot of additional financial strain on many households in the area.

Participants in Botshabelo also highlighted the high levels of unemployment in their area as a major challenge for them. When asked what the biggest concerns in Botshabelo are, participant 7 answered: “In general, I think it is unemployment. That is our biggest challenge in this area.” (Interview #7). According to interviewees, the government is the biggest employer in the region via the large number of schools in the area, a regional court, and a large district hospital in the community, where many UFS students provide professional services as part of their training. The researchers were also told about the large manufacturing area located on the outskirts of the community, which employed Botshabelo residents in the past. However, they also added that the infrastructure is mostly unused nowadays or is rented to foreign nationals who pay below-minimum wages (less than what people get from social grants); it is therefore not seen as a very viable employment option for most community members. In the words of one resident: “The industrial area also has a negative reputation among some of the community members who previously worked there for foreign nationals, who reportedly underplayed and exploited

them.” (Interview #7). Given that there are so few job opportunities in the community, many members of the community are forced to travel great distances to and from work. This not only puts a financial strain on their very tight budgets but is also associated with a number of safety concerns, as will be discussed later.

Thaba Nchu residents are also strongly affected by very high levels of unemployment and the resulting need for work/ job opportunities, compelling them to rely heavily on government grants as their main source of income – similar to what was found in the other two regions.

Safety, security, and crime

The second most prominent concern mentioned, is the high level of crime in Mangaung. According to the participants, this mostly comprises housebreaking and theft, but also includes more violent crimes such as murder and rape. Many of the participants attributed this to the high levels of unemployment, as well as to a number of other aspects such as gangsterism and the abuse of drugs and alcohol.

In addition, the fact that many community members – especially those residing in Botshabelo – are compelled to travel long distances to and from work, also results in additional safety-related risks. According to one of the participants: “Many people must leave their homes early to travel to Bloemfontein for work, and often return late at night. Many of them must then walk from where they are dropped by the taxis to where they stay. This makes them vulnerable to robbery and even rape.” (Interview #7).

Government-related services and infrastructure

As mentioned earlier, the inadequate provision of water is a huge problem in all three sections of the community included in this study. According to many of the participants, this stems from a general water scarcity as well as from old and unmaintained infrastructure, as depicted in Figure 11. As a result of the poor maintenance, leaks abound, and there are many streets that are frequently flooded – which is a serious concern, given the scarcity of water in the region. This flooding, along with less than adequate maintenance, has also been reported to influence the local road infrastructure, which is currently riddled with potholes. In Botshabelo in particular, participants often complained about the state of their water and road infrastructure. According to many residents, local community conditions are not improving, because very little to no maintenance is done on existing infrastructure. As a result, much of the community’s infrastructure is slowly but surely falling into a state of disrepair and becoming increasingly unusable.

Likewise, a prominent theme that emerged from the interviews in Thaba Nchu, was that road infrastructure in their community was highly problematic and in a state of ever-increasing disrepair. As one participant stated: “Here in our area, our road network was one of the best. Now we can hardly drive here.” (Interview #10). Another issue, similar to what was found in other sections, is the lack or inadequate provision of basic services such as the provision of water and electricity. According to one of the participants: “Water is available, but it is not getting to the people.” (Interview #10). Interviewees repeatedly emphasised how much their community infrastructure had deteriorated over the years. According to the participants, this is mainly the result of the community not receiving adequate governmental support. As participant 10 explained: “We are not getting the support. I think it is our right to get the support, but we are not getting what we as a community need from government.” (Interview #10).

Many parts of the communities in Mangaung are also overrun by litter and refuse, because local municipal services are not available in some parts of the community. According to one of the participants, the general oblivious attitude of some members of the community in relation to littering is another contributing factor.

Educational challenges

According to one of the participants, one of the biggest challenges in some parts of Bloemfontein (especially the Heidedal area) is the inadequate schooling among the majority of local residents. In his

view: “Many of the children that arrive at the school for grade R or 1 have never seen a book before.” (Interview #11). This is in stark contrast to some of the more affluent areas in the community, where many community members have advanced academic qualifications and are employed in a wide range of economically gainful positions.

Another challenge that has been identified, centres on capacity limitations at local schools in Thaba 'Nchu. According to one of the participants: “Our children are bussed out of the community to schools in Bloemfontein every day.” (Interview #10). This is mainly because many of the farm schools as well as some of the schools in villages have been closed. As a result, many learners are obliged to travel to and from school daily with transport provided by the department, and others have to walk to school and back. According to one of the participants, many children miss school when the transport is not available or when the weather prevents them from attending school.

Social challenges

Another big challenge in Bloemfontein (most notably in Heidedal) is the fact that many households in the community are headed by single parents. In almost all cases, mothers were found to fulfil the single-parent role, as fathers are reportedly mostly absent in such cases.

According to some of the participants, the youth in many areas of the greater Mangaung area, especially in Thaba 'Nchu, are particularly affected by the challenges in the area, and are highly susceptible to substance abuse (especially alcohol, and drugs such as nyaope), teenage pregnancies, etc. Another recent development in this community is the smoking of so-called ‘hubbly bubbly’ pipes at local taverns: “It is an in-thing. On a Saturday afternoon you will see many people sitting in taverns, drinking and smoking their hubbly bubblys. The smoke hangs like a cloud over the place.” (Interview #7). Some of the participants are of the opinion that these activities often lead to the use of other, more dangerous substances and all the social ills that goes with it, such as crime and domestic violence.

Cost of transport

A final major challenge is the cost of transport. As mentioned earlier, many members of the different sections commute to and from cities such as Bloemfontein for work. This is not only very time-consuming, but also quite costly, seeing that many of them must take multiple taxis just to get from their residence in Botshabelo to their place of employment.

Community strengths

The participants confirmed that all government-related services and most business- and corporate-related services are available in the city of Bloemfontein. In contrast to the other sections, Bloemfontein supports a plethora of facilities for entertainment and leisure (such as restaurants, gymnasiums, movie theatres), education (such as a university and colleges), health care (hospitals, clinics, pharmacies), commerce (multiple large malls and shopping complexes, businesses, industries), and cultural assets (such as monuments, memorial sites, museums, etc.), to name just a few.

As far as assets in Botshabelo are concerned, the participants confirmed that there are several operative schools in the area. It is further evident that many government-related services and facilities are also available in the community. In addition, at least three community strengths were identified from the data: the community’s local radio station and youth centre/facilities, the availability of government-related services, and industrial infrastructure.

Local radio station and youth centre/facilities

One of the most prominent strength-related themes mentioned by all the participants in Botshabelo, is their local radio station and youth centre. According to them, the station is a valued source of relevant and useful information and opportunities in the community and is also used to bring problems and issues

in the community to the fore. The youth centre, in turn, is regularly used to involve the local youth in skills development and training.



Figure 12: Radio station and youth centre in Botshabelo

In addition, there are also sports and recreational facilities available for the youth and other community members. Observational data indicates that these facilities are frequently used after school and also on weekends by especially the youth in the community for leisure and relaxation purposes.



Figure 13: Sports and recreational facilities in Botshabelo

Government-related services

Despite the current challenges, many participants commented on the availability of prominent government-related infrastructure and services in Botshabelo, such as a large district hospital, clinics, schools, a court, etc. According to them, this type of government infrastructure and services (although not always as functional) is valued, as it enables residents to access government services in their community, which has time and cost-saving implications for them.

Industrial infrastructure

A third very prominent community strength-related theme mentioned by more than one participant, is the availability of an industrial area next to Botshabelo. According to them, this facility could potentially provide many job opportunities in the area. More research and investment are, however, needed to make this asset more feasible.

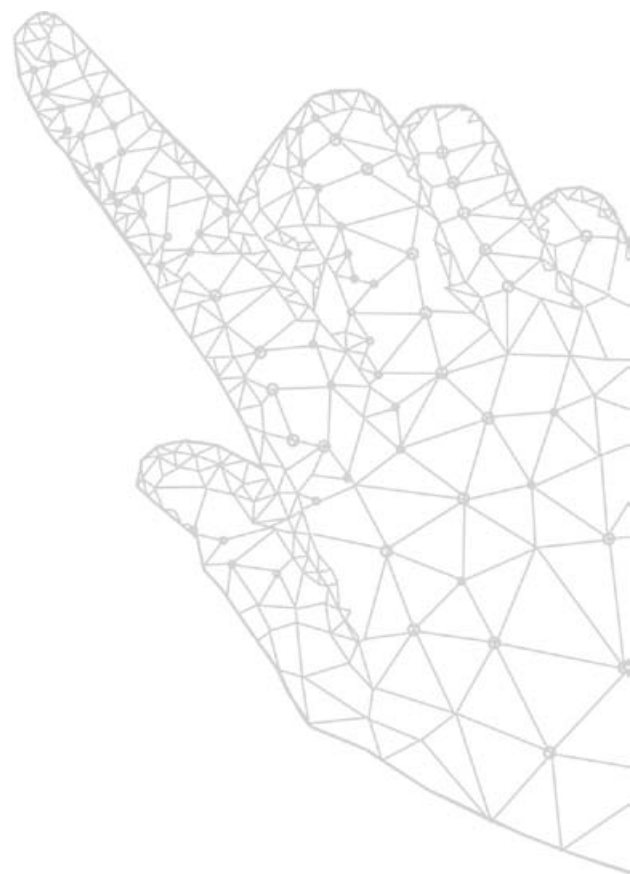
Finally, at least two unique community strengths were identified in Thaba 'Nchu. This includes traditional leadership and the proposed InvestRural master plan that was developed specifically to address various challenges in this region.

Traditional leadership

One of the strengths identified by the participants is the existence of strong traditional leadership. This includes tribal chieftains who are based in the 42 villages. Some of the traditional leaders also have programmes and projects on the ground to assist and support the members living in their community. This includes the implementation of a modified version of the government's 'one-house-one-hectare project' (which was not successful in its original form), whereby local community members are given access to land for agricultural purposes.

InvestRural master plan

The proposed InvestRural master plan is a long-term plan focusing on rural development for traditional communities. According to one of the participants: "This is a first for the country because when you look at it, it is specifically focused on areas such as ours (traditional areas)." (Interview #10). The plan itself involves giving each member of a community access to one hectare of land that they can use for agricultural purposes to become more self-sustainable. This programme also includes mentorship, skills development and training, and the provision of basic equipment and materials participants need to be successful in their agricultural efforts.



Trompsburg community

Trompsburg is a very small community whose activities mainly centre around livestock farming. It is, however, the administrative capital for the Gariep District and therefore hosts many of the district government's services. This includes many municipal offices as well as staff working at the large district hospital located outside the town. Many people working in Trompsburg have indicated that they do not want to live there, and therefore commute between Bloemfontein and Trompsburg on a daily or weekly basis. The town itself is divided into a main town section and former location area. Residents are mostly black African and Sesotho-speaking (Stats-SA 2016). The UFS has an interprofessional health platform in the community, which is used to train its students and provide services in the community.



Figure 14: The Trompsburg community

Community deficits

Four main deficit-related themes were identified for the community. As was the case in the other communities, this includes high levels of unemployment, poverty, and the need for work; issues related to government services and infrastructure; and several social challenges.

Unemployment, poverty, and the need for work

All the participants indicated that unemployment is rife in the community. According to one of the participants – a former teacher – he often observed matriculants from his school end up sitting at home with nothing to do (Interview #18). Another participant confirmed this: “Work and new job opportunities in the community is very sporadic. Many people sit without work.” (Interview #25). As a result, most people rely on grants as a source of income.

Farmers are reportedly the biggest employers in the area and some farmers employ around 80 workers daily. Unfortunately, most of the farm work tends to be seasonal, which means that income from this type of work is sporadic. This was confirmed by one of the participants: “The farmers are the biggest employers in the area, some people work for them, the rest is unemployed. The hopeless.” (Interview #19). The latter appears to be a big problem in the community. According to the same participant, many people in the lower income areas have given up all hope. They do not even bother to try to better themselves and are, at best, merely surviving. According to him, many matriculants do not even attempt

to apply for tertiary education because of the belief that they will not be able to afford it. This suggests that local community members do not have the information they need in relation to the availability of bursaries and how to apply for them, especially with regard to the NSFAS bursaries provided by government to low-income households.

Government-related services and infrastructure

As is the case with the other communities, Trompsburg residents also face many service-related problems, such as the inadequate provision of water. As a result, many members of the community in the main town area have their own boreholes. Other members of the community indicated that they are compelled to buy water and pay as much as R5 for 25 litres of drinking water.

According to one of the participants: “They also had no services for several months, because the municipal workers were not paid.” (Interview #19). Residents therefore had to take care of their own waste and refuse removal. Another participant indicated that: “The municipal officers could not provide services to this part of the community because they had no fuel.” (Participant #20). By implication, this points to mismanagement.

Another major community concern derives from the lack of road maintenance, which is attributed to poor management as well as to a lack of necessary resources and equipment. According to one of the participants: “There are seven grading levels between the person deciding that a road should be graded and the person doing the work, or there is no money to pay the person to do the work.” (Interview #21). Another problem is that there is only one grader in the area. This often causes long waiting periods before a road is graded. The farming community seems to be particularly affected, especially during the rainy season when many of the dirt roads in the area are rendered inaccessible.

Community strengths

Four strength-related themes emerged from the data: the strong sense of community, the primary school, the farming community, and low levels of crime.

Sense of community

Many of the participants commented on the cooperation and strong sense of community that exist among residents. The community is also perceived as being skilled at mobilising themselves and standing together on matters that affect them. There are also reports of some of the local community members driving initiatives to create work and opportunities for other community members. The sense of community was reportedly displayed during the COVID-19 pandemic when residents assisted the poor and unemployed with food.

Primary school in Trompsburg

Many of the participants commented on the very good primary school in Trompsburg, and the fact that it has a hostel where many of the children from the surrounding areas can reside (which translates into higher school attendance rates; it also means that these children do not have to commute long distances on foot or by taxi, as other children in the province are often compelled to do). Collectively, this means that children are believed to receive a good quality education at this school.

The contribution of the farming community

According to the participants, the farmers in the area play a big role in the economy of the town by providing permanent as well as seasonal jobs, and by donating food and other goods to those in need. This makes a huge difference among members of especially the former location area of the community, who generally rely on government grants as their main source of income.

Low levels of crime

Unlike the other communities that have been studied, Trompsburg experiences relatively low levels of crime. According to residents, while they do suffer from stock theft and petty theft from time to time, general crime levels are lower than that found in the other communities. Asked why this might be the case, one participant replied: “This is likely because of cameras, neighbourhood watches, and those kinds of things.” (Interview #18).

Central/recurring deficits and strength-related themes and discussion

Taken together, as evident in Table 2, the findings suggest that three deficit-related themes in particular cut across all three communities. Themes listed under each community have been ranked in order of perceived importance, with the most prominent themes listed first.

Table 2: Central/recurring deficit-related themes

Qwaqwa	Greater Mangaung	Trompsburg
Unemployment, poverty, and the need for work	Unemployment, poverty, and the need for work	Unemployment, poverty, and the need for work
Government-related services, infrastructure, and housing	Government-related services and infrastructure	Government-related services and infrastructure
Safety, security, and crime	Safety, security, and crime	Social challenges
Food security	Social challenges	
Educational challenges	Cost of transport	
Social challenges		

Of all the deficit-related themes, the challenge of unemployment and concomitant poverty and the need for work seems to be the biggest in all three communities. These problems also appear to be highly prevalent in the rest of the Free State, as well as other provinces such as the North-West (Coetzee and Nell, 2021). In addition, as recently indicated in the SA government’s Quarterly Labour Force Survey, the current level of unemployment is around 32,6% and appears to be particularly high among the youth – a factor that was pointed out by the participants in this study as the biggest and most urgent need in all three communities explored in this study.

It is also evident that government is currently the biggest employer in the three communities. This trend is not sustainable and can only continue if there is a sufficient taxpayer basis. Local economic growth (e.g. the processes and initiatives through which local government or community-based organisations stimulate or maintain business activities and employment [Meyer, 2014]) and innovative solutions to create jobs are therefore of the utmost importance. The current study showed that many local community members supplement their income via entrepreneurial activities. This could perhaps be leveraged to provide additional goods and services that are in demand among local communities. In addition, as mentioned by some of the participants, there are a number of tracts of land available, and many of the areas around Qwaqwa have the potential to be developed in the context of the tourism industry. These opportunities could be explored by the UFS. In addition, what is also evident in at least two of the communities – Qwaqwa and the Botshabelo section of the Greater Mangaung – is the availability of existing government infrastructure. These facilities, which include manufacturing, retail, and service-related facilities, could be renovated and converted to cater for the needs of the local communities and, in the process, provide additional job opportunities.

The second most prominent set of challenges and subsequent needs relates to government services, e.g. the provision of water, electricity, and the maintenance of existing infrastructure such as roads. Water provision, in particular, seems to be a complicated and highly problematic matter in the region.

According to many of the participants, the issues do not centre so much on the availability of water, but rather on the failure of local municipalities to pay Bloemwater, and on unmaintained water infrastructure where a lot of water gets wasted. The UFS could potentially play a bigger role in building the capacity of local municipalities, especially when it comes to general and financial management. In addition, engineering sciences could potentially play a role in supporting the establishment of improved water as well as electrical infrastructure.

The third most prominent theme that emerged in two of the communities – Qwaqwa and the Botshabelo (and the second most prominent theme found in the lower income areas of Bloemfontein, such as Heidedal) section of the Greater Mangaung – is that there are high levels of crime and a subsequent need for improved safety and security in the communities. It would appear that unemployment and social problems such as poverty and substance abuse are pertinent drivers of crime. The UFS could potentially play a role in understanding the drivers of crime in local communities, and as mentioned above, could work with communities to find innovative solutions to address some of the challenges. There are also good examples of community-driven solutions that could potentially be implemented in the three communities, such as local policing forums, the establishment of community WhatsApp groups, and active patrolling by community groups. The latter appears to be very effective in communities in the North-West and Northern Cape, which suggests that there might be value in implementing such strategies in Qwaqwa, Botshabelo, and in crime-affected areas of Bloemfontein.

A number of social challenges were found to be present in all of the communities. Foremost among these was substance abuse, which was ranked as the third most significant challenge in Trompsburg, the fourth most pressing in Thaba Nchu, and the fifth most serious in Qwaqwa and Botshabelo. The prevalence of substance abuse is claimed to be linked to other challenges such as unemployment, poverty, and teenage pregnancies. Here, the UFS' social and behavioural science disciplines could potentially play an important role to explore the antecedents, correlates, inter-relationships, and possible solutions associated with such problems.

Considered together, there appears to be a significant set of inter-relationships between the various community challenges identified. Figure 15 provides an outline of these relationships.

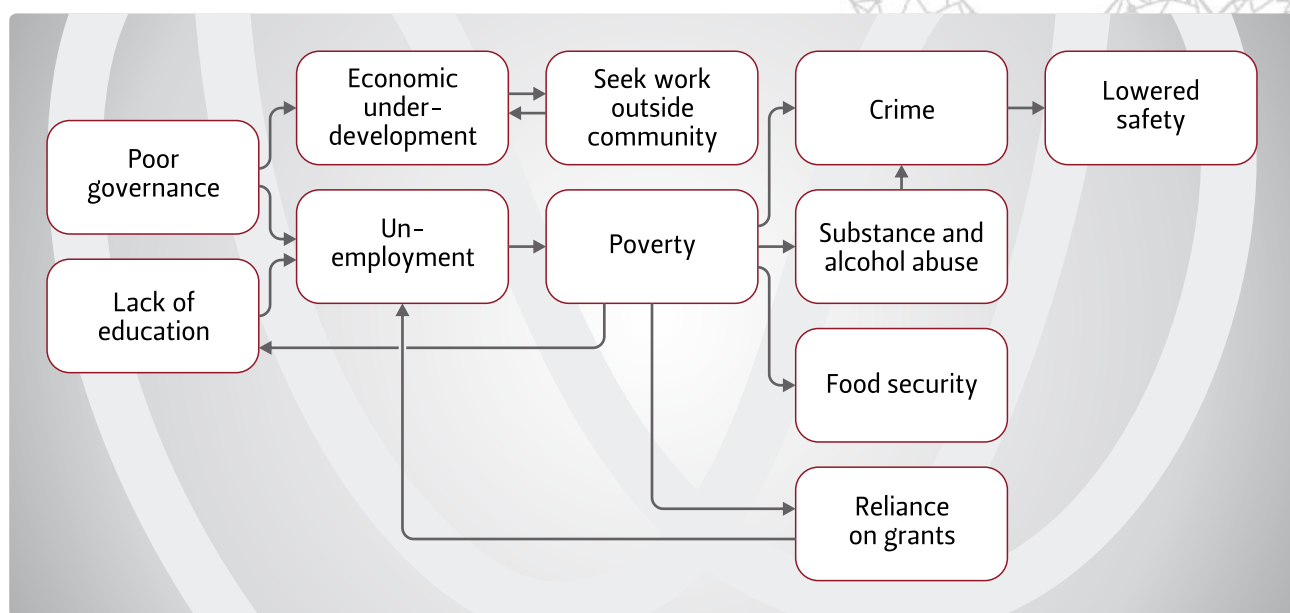


Figure 15: Interrelationship between community challenges

As depicted in Figure 15, ineffective governance as well as low levels of education prevalent in most communities, appear to prevent the establishment of viable industries and businesses, greatly limiting

employment opportunities. This underdevelopment and generally low levels of education contribute to widespread unemployment, especially in communities outside of Bloemfontein. It also compels many residents (not living in the comparatively more affluent regions in Bloemfontein) to seek work outside of their communities, resulting in a local skills-drain, which further reinforces local underdevelopment. Furthermore, the lack of employment opportunities within these communities in turn results in high levels of poverty, which leads to an (over)reliance on government grants for economic survival. Such grants reduce the motivation to seek or create employment opportunities, reinforcing the status quo. Moreover, poverty also becomes a driver of crime, substance and alcohol abuse, and lack of food security. These problems also tend to be mutually reinforcing, as substance abuse and lack of food security tend to further promote crime. These social problems then reduce safety, which (along with the other noted factors) very likely also contributes to making these communities less attractive as investment opportunities. This, combined with widespread poverty, serves as barriers to economic development and access to educational opportunities, which conspire to reinforce the negative cycle.

As can be observed in Table 3, it is much more difficult to identify recurring themes when it comes to community strengths and assets. This is mainly because these factors tend to be highly context specific.

Table 3: Central/ recurring strength-related themes

Qwaqwa	Greater Mangaung	Trompsburg
Strong sense of community and cooperation among members of the community	Government-related services and most business- and corporate-related services	Sense of community
New political regime	Local radio station and youth centre/ facilities	Primary school in Trompsburg
Existing (unused) infrastructure	Traditional leadership	The contributions of the farming community
Other opportunities	InvestRural master plan	Low levels of crime

One of the themes that was, however, identified in two of the communities, and which is probably also present in the other regions (although it was not specifically mentioned), is the strong sense of community and cooperation that exists among residents. This could potentially be leveraged by the UFS and other role players to get buy-in and support from local communities for interventions, for example, to address crime in their areas or to address educational and social challenges.

Then there are also very specific assets that contribute to (or could potentially contribute to) community well-being, such as the new political regime, comparatively high levels of education among certain individuals, and tourism potential in the Qwaqwa area. All of these elements could be targeted by relevant faculties at the UFS to improve the lives and livelihoods of community members in the area. Other assets included the local radio station and youth centre in Botshabelo. These were widely regarded as important sources of information and recreation for members of the community and are assets not available in the other communities. In Thaba 'Nchu, the most significant community strengths included the traditional leadership and its InvestRural master plan. Trompsburg residents regarded inputs by important stakeholder groups such as local farmers as a significant asset.

All these community strengths could potentially be leveraged to address at least some of the most prominent community deficits that currently exist in these three, as well as other communities in the province.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study aimed to qualitatively explore community deficits and strengths in the three selected communities where most of the UFS' engaged scholarship activities are taking place, and where the UFS aims to make a more sustainable impact in the future. The findings suggest that the biggest need that currently exists in all three communities is the need for employment, followed by improved government services and infrastructure, and improved safety and security. The following is therefore recommended:

1. The UFS should use some of its research capacity to explore and identify barriers that prevent the creation of job opportunities. Similarly, possibilities such as re-imagining the use of existing government and industrial infrastructure should be explored as a means of creating more job opportunities.
2. With the aid of relevant departments, possibilities for tourism development in Qwaqwa could be explored.
3. The UFS and other role players could transfer management-related skills to local authorities so that government-related services can be improved.
4. The UFS, in partnership with government departments such as the police, could explore community-level interventions that could be implemented to address the high levels of crime that are prevalent in these regions.
5. Given the great value attributed to the community radio station in Botshabelo, there might be value in initiatives where communication studies/journalism students collaborate with this and other communities to increase the value derived from the radio station and also to establish similar stations in the other communities.
6. There could also be substantive merit in research projects that target significant community problems such as alcohol and substance abuse, crime, teenage pregnancies, etc., with the aim of understanding the antecedents and correlates of these issues. In turn, such knowledge could inform contextually relevant community interventions.

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