

Article

Youth Work Practice in South Africa's Non-Profit Organisations Through the Lens of Self-Determination Theory

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Abstract

Youth workers within non-profit organisations in South Africa play a vital role in supporting the government's agenda to mainstream positive youth development through the delivery of youth services. This study aims to examine the motivations that drive youth workers to get involved in youth work practice and the challenges they experience while performing their roles in non-profit organisations in South Africa. This qualitative study purposively sampled 10 youth workers. Two methods of data collection were employed, which are the Qualitative Online Survey (QOS) and online interviews through WhatsApp telephonic conversations. Data collected were analysed through reflectivity thematic analysis. This study is informed by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which highlights the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational sources that drive individuals to act or pursue specific goals. The findings indicate that wanting to gain practical work experience as well as the desire to make a difference in young people's lives is a major drive for youth workers' involvement in youth work practice within the NPO sector. The study further found that youth workers experience a variety of challenges that affect their productivity and their work in general, including lack of funding, absence of training, orientation and workshops as part of professional development, as well as community resistance. To address some of these challenges and encourage youth workers' involvement in youth work practice within the NPO sector, this study recommends an urgent need for structured and continuous professional development pathways to strengthen youth workers' skills, enhance programme effectiveness and support the professionalisation of youth work in South Africa.

Keywords: civic society; youth work; youth workers; non-profit organisations; South Africa

1. Introduction

Youth work practice refers to a set of activities that occur outside formal education, primarily aimed at promoting positive youth development (Kiilakoski & Kauppinen, 2021). These activities are implemented in partnership with young people by youth workers, some of whom have received formal training in youth work, while others rely on their passion and commitment to youth development (Hammond & McArdle, 2024). Since the advent of democracy in 1994, the South African government has prioritised youth work as a mechanism for strengthening the national youth development agenda through the establishment of the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) under the National Youth Development Agency Act No. 54 of 2008. The primary mandate of the NYDA is to mainstream youth development through youth entrepreneurship, volunteering, mentoring and market linkages (National Youth Development Agency, 2025). Furthermore, the National Youth Policy (2021) shows the importance of partnerships between the state



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and various stakeholders, including non-profit organisations (NPOs), in promoting youth development and strengthening the youth work sector. Youth workers in NPOs play a critical role in complementing government efforts to achieve youth development goals by providing career guidance, mentorship and access to employment opportunities (Duncan, 2024). NPOs involved in after-school programmes in South Africa have emerged as key stakeholders that promote positive youth development (Chauke, 2022). Within these organisations, youth workers serve as frontline practitioners who engage young people in meaningful activities that contribute to their holistic development, including the use of digital media technologies to promote health and wellbeing (Chauke & Kakuru, 2025b).

Youth work in South Africa does not yet have a statutory professional body comparable to that of social work (Hlagala, 2012). This is largely because youth work has not been formally regulated as a profession by the South African Council for Social Service Professions (Chauke & Kakuru, 2025a). Despite the lack of formal professional recognition, youth work continues to be implemented by various stakeholders. These include government departments in partnership with non-profit organisations (NPOs), as well as the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) through initiatives such as the National Youth Service Programme, youth entrepreneurship development, mentorship and linkage programmes and other youth development interventions (National Youth Development Agency, 2022). In addition, youth work practice has increasingly been integrated into school settings through the South African Presidential Youth Employment Initiative, where youth workers are deployed in schools to support young people and reduce disengagement from education. This intervention seeks to address the rising number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) in South Africa (McKay & Amina, 2025). Currently, formal education or training in youth work is not a prerequisite for practice in South Africa, largely due to the field's lack of professionalisation (Raselekoane, 2019). At present, only one university in South Africa offers youth work or youth development qualifications at the degree level, following the phasing out of similar programmes at other institutions. This limited availability of formal training highlights the urgent need for structured youth work education and training to enhance the competence and effectiveness of youth workers (Chauke, 2026).

Non-profit organisations in South Africa are established in terms of the Non-Profit Organisations Act No. 71 of 1997, which recognises the critical role of NPOs in addressing the socio-economic challenges facing the country. The Department of Social Development (DSD) is responsible for the registration and regulation of NPOs (Department of Social Development, 2011). Furthermore, the DSD partners with NPOs at national, provincial and local levels, with some organisations receiving government funding to implement social and youth development programmes. Within the youth work sector, NPOs play a key role in supporting government efforts to reach communities and populations that may not easily access state services (Choto et al., 2020). These activities include youth and community development initiatives focused on health and wellness, socialisation and education. Importantly, NPOs often operate at the grassroots level, ensuring that services reach marginalised communities where government presence may be limited. However, the sustainability and effectiveness of NPOs in South Africa are frequently undermined by funding constraints and donor conditions, as many organisations rely heavily on private and government funding to fulfil their mandates (Seabe, 2012). The partnership between the Department of Social Development and NPOs has been widely criticised as problematic. Social workers, community development workers and youth workers within the NPO sector have highlighted the DSD funding model as a major source of institutional and operational challenges. This funding model has been associated with power imbalances and, in some cases, a lack of mutual respect between government officials

and NPO practitioners, given the department's role as a primary funder (Van Niekerk & Matthias, 2019). Youth work within the NPO sector in South Africa is often performed by professionals, such as social workers, who implement programmes related to child protection and youth development. Practitioners operating in these contexts frequently experience challenges related to inadequate funding, which limits their ability to effectively carry out their responsibilities. Funding constraints have been similarly identified as a major challenge for practitioners working within foster care and broader child welfare services in civil society organisations (Sibanda & Ngwabi, 2025).

A dual funding mechanism is employed in South Africa to support youth work initiatives. Government departments, as well as district and local municipalities, receive funding from the National Treasury to implement youth development interventions, while also partnering with and funding NPOs to deliver complementary programmes. This dual mechanism underscores the importance of partnerships in youth work practice (National Youth Policy, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure, in collaboration with the National Youth Development Agency through the National Youth Service Programme, partnered with youth-led NPOs to implement youth work activities aimed at mitigating the impact of the pandemic (Chauke, 2020). Despite such initiatives, the majority of youth workers within the NPO sector continue to face significant challenges in effectively implementing youth development interventions due to persistent funding limitations (Chauke & Malatji, 2022). Moreover, the lack of coordination and organisation within the civil society youth work sector further constrains the effective implementation and integration of youth work interventions in South Africa (Mudimu, 2016).

Despite the positive contributions made by youth workers and other social service practitioners within the NPO sector, they continue to experience numerous challenges that affect their productivity and the delivery of youth work activities. These include low remuneration (Social Current, 2025), limited opportunities for career advancement and a lack of professional recognition, which collectively undermine their motivation and long-term commitment to the sector (Brock, 2024). Moreover, the sustainability of youth work activities in NPOs is often threatened by inconsistent funding, which serves as a major barrier to mainstreaming positive youth development (Pope, 2016). The existing research in the South African context has largely focused on youth development outcomes, with limited attention given to the lived experiences of youth workers in NPOs, particularly regarding the factors that drive their involvement in youth work and the challenges they encounter in their professional lives (Gaelebele, 2021; Langa & De Lannoy, 2021; Maja & Ngcaweni, 2023). Understanding these perspectives from youth workers within the NPO sector is critical for strengthening youth work practices, enhancing policy interventions and improving working conditions within the NPO sector. Therefore, this study aims to examine the motivations that drive youth workers to get involved in youth work practice and the challenges they experience while performing their roles in non-profit organisations in South Africa. The findings of this study are expected to inform National Youth Policy and contribute to integrated youth development strategies aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of youth work within the NPO sector.

1.1. Literature Review

1.1.1. Conceptualisation of Youth Work Practice

Youth work is a practice with a long history in many countries, particularly in the Global North, where it has been developing for over 150 years. In the Global South, and South Africa in particular, it has a more recent history of approximately 36 years. The Industrial Revolution, which required many parents to leave home in search of better

economic opportunities, often left children in the care of their grandparents. This context contributed to the emergence of youth work, in which youth workers designed various activities to support young people left in the care of their grandparents (Raselekoane, 2019). Metz (2017) argues that youth work consists of many activities that share the same objective, which is to empower young people to the fullest. These activities can occur on the streets, in malls and sports facilities, in community centres and online. Youth work activities are implemented in partnership between youth workers and young people, wherein holistic youth development practices that aim to contribute to young people's personal development are put in place Corney et al. (2022). Some youth workers, in their approach to developing young people, partner with families to ensure that family ecosystem support is integrated into youth work activities (McCrea et al., 2024). According to Manders and Metz (2017), youth workers in their practices offer young people advice and individual guidance that helps young people make well-informed decisions about their lives.

Youth work activities both in the Global North and South take place in government settings, as do non-profit organisations that share the same objective, which is to support the holistic development of young people (Brady et al., 2022; UK Youth, 2021). In South Africa, for instance, non-profit organisations in partnership with or without the government design a variety of youth work activities such as after-school programmes and conflict resolution programmes that focus on young people's social and personal development (Chauke, 2022; South African Association of Youth Clubs, 2024). While unemployment has become a major issue that affects youth wellbeing, the South African government has shifted youth work activities towards youth economic development, where young people are assisted in business intervention with the intention of supporting the youth to venture into entrepreneurship so they can be able to participate in the mainstream economy (National Youth Development Agency, 2025).

The European Union (EU) and its Member States have prioritised the quality of youth work through the systematic integration of youth work into national youth strategies, supported by formal youth work policies and legislative frameworks. These policy interventions ensure the recognition of youth work as a professional field in which qualified youth workers can be trained within institutions of higher learning (Youth Wiki, 2024). The institutionalisation of youth work has contributed to the professionalisation of the sector and strengthened its role in supporting positive youth development across Member States. Furthermore, Youth Wiki (2023) indicates that the EU and its Member States increasingly employ digital approaches to mainstream positive youth development. This includes the strategic use of social media and other digital platforms to disseminate information and resources that are beneficial to young people. In recognition of the evolving digital landscape, the EU has also emphasised the need to enhance the digital competencies of youth workers, enabling them to effectively integrate digital technologies into youth work practice and improve engagement with young people in diverse contexts.

1.1.2. Involvement in Youth Work

Research across various contexts shows that youth workers are motivated by a combination of personal passion, commitment to social change, strong value systems and a desire to support young people's development. In Ireland, the National Youth Council of Ireland (2021) reports that many youth workers are driven by a passion for supporting young people's development and a commitment to helping them navigate the challenges they encounter in their daily lives. For others, youth work provides an avenue to make a meaningful difference in young people's trajectories. Similarly, in Scotland, some youth workers enter the field to address deviant behaviours among young people. Davidson (2024) found

that youth participation in youth work activities contributed to positive behavioural change, illustrating the significant impact of youth work on young people's conduct. Passion and genuine care for young people are further highlighted as key motivators for youth workers, particularly through relationship-building and engagement in interactive activities such as sports and circus arts (Croix, 2013).

Commitment to offering individualised support also plays a vital role in attracting individuals to youth work. The Youth Network (2020) emphasises that providing guidance and personal support motivates many to participate in youth development initiatives. Similarly, Rais et al. (2021) note that young people who volunteer as youth workers in community-based initiatives are often driven by a deep passion for helping others in their communities. Values and intrinsic motivations further shape individuals' decisions to join the youth work sector. Sutcliffe and Cooper (2024) argue that commitments to social justice, fairness and equality strongly influence youth workers' professional choices. Hammond and McArdle (2024) also highlight that some youth workers are motivated by the opportunity to engage in meaningful conversations with young people, particularly young men. Such conversations allow young men to express their feelings, an important protective factor for mental health given that many fear stigma and struggle to articulate emotional challenges (Molokoane & Modipane, 2025). Youth workers, therefore, contribute significantly to promoting emotional wellbeing and encouraging youth participation (Grant et al., 2020).

In many countries, youth work continues to be viewed primarily as voluntary service, resulting in the sector being dominated by volunteers, many of whom lack formal qualifications but view volunteering as a pathway to achieving long-term career goals (A. Stukas & Wilson, 2022). A. A. Stukas et al. (2016) further emphasise that a desire to bring about positive social change motivates individuals to engage in youth and community development work. Although community and youth development work in the non-governmental sector often offers limited material benefits, individuals remain committed to this work due to deeper motivations such as compassion and spiritual intelligence (Agnihotri et al., 2025). This aligns with findings by Vijay et al. (2016), who argue that the drive to promote social change is one of the most significant motivators for those joining non-governmental organisations involved in youth and community development initiatives.

1.1.3. Impediments in Contemporary Youth Work

The youth work sector continues to face multiple interrelated challenges that affect both the quality of services provided to young people and the wellbeing of youth workers. A foundational concern is the lack of professional regulation, including the absence of formal qualifications required to work with young people and the limited presence of a guiding code of ethics. This regulatory gap creates vulnerabilities for both youth workers and young people and undermines accountability within the sector (Bawick, 2006). Despite their positive contributions, youth workers' professional value remains largely unrecognised by local administrations, resulting in weak professional identity and low societal status (Sala-Torrent & Planas-Lladó, 2024). This lack of recognition reinforces the perception of youth work as informal or marginal, rather than as a specialised social service profession.

Closely linked to professional status are the working conditions under which youth workers operate. Youth workers frequently function within rigid bureaucratic monitoring systems that divert their attention away from relational and developmental work toward administrative compliance, leading to frustration and role conflict (De St Croix & Doherty, 2021). The nature of youth work itself further intensifies these pressures. Youth workers often engage with young people who exhibit high-risk behaviours, including criminal activity, requiring sustained democratic dialogue and non-coercive engagement strategies

that are emotionally and psychologically demanding (Vienna, 2022). In some contexts, youth workers operate in unsafe environments, working with unruly youth in conditions that may place their personal safety at risk (Curry et al., 2011). These working conditions highlight the complex and often precarious nature of youth work practice.

The emotional labour associated with youth work represents another significant challenge. The emotional intensity of working closely with vulnerable and high-risk young people—particularly in contexts characterised by negative organisational climates, limited staffing and insufficient institutional support—contributes to high stress levels among youth workers (White et al., 2020). Low job security further exacerbates these pressures, increasing the risk of mental health challenges within the sector (Milner & Reavley, 2019). Burnout is therefore common, driven by the sustained emotional and psychological availability required of youth workers and the absence of adequate self-care structures (Bellman, 2024). Working in the life-space of high-risk children has been shown to significantly contribute to burnout and staff turnover, making the retention of experienced youth workers particularly difficult (Barford & Whelton, 2010).

Economic precarity remains one of the most persistent structural challenges facing the youth work sector. Youth workers are often poorly compensated despite long working hours and high levels of responsibility. In South Africa, youth workers are inadequately remunerated relative to their contributions, reflecting broader systemic undervaluation of the profession (Chauke & Malatji, 2021). Gharabaghi (2010) notes that some youth workers receive extremely low wages or work without pay, creating financial instability for themselves and their families. This underpayment is closely linked to insufficient and unstable funding for youth organisations, particularly within the NGO sector. Inadequate funding constrains programme delivery, reduces productivity and contributes to staff attrition as organisations struggle to sustain salaries (Pope, 2016; Petkovic, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these challenges, with many youth organisations experiencing severe budget cuts that undermined service continuity and workforce stability.

Finally, collaboration with key stakeholders remains both essential and problematic in youth work practice. In school-based settings, youth workers often encounter resistance from teachers who may not fully understand or value their role (Chauke, 2024). This lack of role clarity is particularly evident in interventions addressing risky youth sexual behaviour, where uncertainty persists regarding whether youth workers or teachers should be responsible for delivering youth health services (Keogh et al., 2018). Such tensions undermine effective inter-sectoral collaboration and limit the impact of youth development initiatives.

Most of the existing literature focuses on the factors that motivate youth workers to enter the youth work sector, as well as the general challenges they encounter. However, these studies rarely consider the specific experiences of youth workers employed within non-profit organisations. This represents a significant gap, particularly given the central role that non-profit organisations play in youth development in many regions. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining the phenomenon from the perspectives of youth workers operating within non-profit organisations in the Global South.

1.1.4. Theoretical Framing

This study is informed by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which highlights the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational sources that drive individuals to act or pursue specific goals (Ryan & Deci, 2017). According to SDT, extrinsic motivation refers to engaging in an activity to attain external rewards or to avoid negative consequences, whereas intrinsic motivation involves undertaking an activity for personal satisfaction, enjoyment or inherent interest, without the expectation of external rewards (Deci et al., 2013). SDT further posits that human motivation is guided by three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy,

competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Autonomy refers to individuals' capacity to make independent choices and regulate their actions volitionally. Competence reflects the need to feel effective, skilled and capable of achieving desired outcomes. Relatedness involves the need to feel connected, valued and supported by others within a social context (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When these psychological needs are fulfilled, individuals are more likely to exhibit optimal motivation and wellbeing.

This theoretical framework provides a lens through which to understand the intrinsic and extrinsic factors motivating youth workers to engage in youth work practice within South African non-profit organisations (NPOs). It also enables an examination of the contextual challenges that may undermine their autonomy, competence and relatedness in the youth work environment. In terms of autonomy, youth workers may choose to engage in youth work practice within NPOs based on personal commitment and professional interest. However, their autonomy can be constrained when organisational leaders make decisions regarding youth development programmes without consulting them, thereby limiting their ability to exercise independent judgement. Regarding competence, some youth workers may experience greater freedom and capacity to express their skills within NPO settings, particularly when they hold leadership roles or operate in less bureaucratic environments than those found in government sectors. Additionally, their sense of competence may be hindered by inadequate funding, which impedes the implementation of meaningful youth development initiatives (Pope, 2016). With respect to relatedness, youth workers may be drawn to NPOs because these environments allow them to make tangible contributions to young people's lives and to feel valued within their organisational and community contexts. Nonetheless, relatedness may be compromised when youth workers receive limited support from government structures or insufficient recognition from the broader community. By situating youth workers' experiences within the framework of Self-Determination Theory, this study underscores the necessity of nurturing their psychological needs in the NPO sector to strengthen the delivery of positive youth development. Enhancing youth workers' autonomy requires their inclusion in decision-making processes concerning youth programmes. Strengthening competence necessitates financial and structural support from the government, including adequate funding and incentives for youth development initiatives. Finally, promoting relatedness calls for sustained recognition and support from both government and community stakeholders for the critical role youth workers play in fostering youth development.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Approach, Study Setting and Participants

This study aims to examine the motivations that drive youth workers to get involved in youth work practice and the challenges they experience while performing their roles in non-profit organisations in South Africa. To achieve this aim, the study will pursue the following objectives: to identify factors that motivate youth workers to engage in youth work in NPOs in South Africa, and to examine the challenges faced by youth workers in NPOs during the execution of their duties. This study is guided by the following main research question: what motivates youth workers to engage in youth work, and what challenges do they experience while performing their roles in non-profit organisations in South Africa? This study adopted a qualitative research approach, as it sought to gain an in-depth understanding of the motivations that drive youth workers to get involved in youth work practice and the challenges they experience while performing their roles in non-profit organisations in South Africa. The qualitative approach was deemed appropriate because it allowed for the exploration of participants' perspectives, narratives and emotional experiences. This approach enabled youth workers from various non-profit

organisations to express their feelings and share their personal stories (Bouzioti, 2023). The philosophical orientation of the study was guided by the interpretivist paradigm, which was carefully selected due to its focus on the lived experiences and realities of the participants. The interpretivist paradigm emphasises understanding human behaviour from the viewpoint of those involved, making it suitable for a study centred on the lived experiences of youth workers who coordinate and implement youth development services within non-profit organisations (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Guided by this paradigm, the researcher sought to explore and collect relevant information directly from participants, allowing them to share their experiences freely without interference. The study was conducted across two provinces in South Africa, namely the Western Cape and Limpopo provinces. Participants were drawn from these diverse settings to capture a wide range of perspectives and contextual differences. This multi-provincial approach enhanced the richness of the data and deepened the understanding of the phenomenon under investigation through the varied experiences of youth workers across different organisational and socio-cultural contexts. These two provinces were purposively selected because youth workers were more accessible in these contexts compared to other provinces, which enabled effective data collection within the study's timeframe. The population of interest comprised youth workers in non-profit organisations across the Western Cape and Limpopo provinces. A total of 10 youth workers, aged 21–33 years, were purposively selected to participate in the study. These participants are classified as young people according to the South African definition of youth, which refers to individuals between the ages of 14 and 35 years (National Youth Development Agency, 2025). Therefore, sampling young people who are practising youth work was essential for this study, as it also provided them with an opportunity to ensure that their voices are heard. All participants had at least one year of experience in youth work within a non-profit organisation. The participants were involved in diverse forms of youth work, including detached youth work, digital youth work and after-school programmes. Including participants engaged in various youth work activities allowed for a broader understanding of their motivations and the challenges they experience. Purposive sampling, a type of non-probability sampling, was employed to identify participants who shared relevant characteristics and possessed contextual knowledge as youth workers coordinating and implementing youth development services (Tajik et al., 2025). Specifically, 5 participants were drawn from each province. Table 1 presents the inclusion criteria for participation in this study.

Table 1. The inclusion criteria for participation required that individuals be the following.

- Between 18 and 35 years of age.
- Residing in either the Western Cape or Limpopo provinces.
- Experience in practicing youth work in non-profit organisations for more than a year.

Youth workers who did not meet these criteria were excluded from the study. All participants' personal information was anonymised to protect their identities, and pseudonyms were used in the reporting of findings.

2.2. Ethics and Data Collection

This study received ethical clearance from the University of South Africa, College of Education (Reference #2023/11/08/57077894/46/AM). Following approval, two methods of data collection were employed, which were the Qualitative Online Survey (QOS) and online interviews through WhatsApp telephonic conversations. In this study, a qualitative online survey was employed because it allowed the researcher to design open-ended questions that were distributed to two participants, one from the Limpopo Province and one from the Western Cape Province. A Google Form link was created and shared with the participants, enabling them to complete the QOS at their convenience. A Qualitative Online

Survey (QOS) was conducted with these two participants because they were unavailable for a telephonic interview due to other commitments. The remaining eight participants, four from Limpopo and four from Western Cape, were interviewed telephonically via WhatsApp. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 min. The researcher had previously worked with NPOs in the youth work sector based in Western Cape and therefore had access to the participants' contact details. He contacted them telephonically, explained the aim of the study, obtained verbal consent and then arranged interviews, which were conducted on 2 and 3 November 2025. The participants from the Limpopo Province were also known to the researcher, and he followed the same procedure of contact, explanation of the study and obtaining verbal consent. To reduce potential bias, the researcher adopted a reflexive approach during data collection and used peer debriefing to ensure interpretations were grounded in participants' perspectives. These interviews were conducted on 5 and 6 November 2025. The same semi-structured interview guide was used consistently for all participants. All participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time and the assurance of confidentiality. Verbal consents were obtained before each interview commenced. WhatsApp sessions were audio-recorded with consent from the participants, and participants were assured that the information shared would only be used for this study and their true identity would be protected and not be disclosed to the public. Table 2 presents the interview guide used during the data collection process. During the telephonic interviews, follow-up questions were asked to the participants to gather rich, in-depth information. In contrast, for the Qualitative Online Survey (QOS), no follow-up questions were asked; only the two predetermined questions were used. However, participants were encouraged to narrate their experiences in as much detail as possible to provide rich, in-depth information that would help answer the main research question.

Table 2. Interview questions guide.

-
- What factors motivated you to engage in youth work within a non-profit organisation?
 - What major challenges do you experience in your role as a youth worker within a non-profit organisation?
-

2.3. Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), was employed in this study to identify, analyse and report patterns and themes within the dataset. The researcher first familiarised himself with the data by thoroughly reading and re-reading the transcripts. This was followed by the generation of initial codes, which were subsequently organised into broader themes. These themes were then refined and structured into a coherent and consistent narrative that accurately represented the data. The final phase involved producing a concise, logical and non-repetitive account of the findings. Throughout the analysis process, the researcher engaged in personal reflexivity to ensure that his prior experiences as a youth worker within non-profit organisations did not influence the interpretation of the results. This reflexive stance helped maintain the integrity of the analysis, ensuring that the findings authentically reflected the participants' perspectives.

2.4. Trustworthiness and Rigour

To uphold the rigour and authenticity of the study's outcomes, multiple strategies were implemented to ensure trustworthiness (Stahl & King, 2020). Credibility was reinforced through continuous interaction with the data and regular peer consultations, while an independent reviewer cross-checked the interpretations to confirm their alignment with

participants' actual responses. Transferability was promoted by offering a comprehensive account of the research context and of participants' profiles, such as their educational levels, gender and racial backgrounds, allowing readers to evaluate the relevance of the findings to other contexts. Dependability was maintained by engaging a seasoned social researcher to assess the analytical process and verify consistency in the interpretation of data. Lastly, confirmability was achieved by incorporating direct quotations from participants to ensure that the results accurately represented their voices and experiences.

3. Results

This section presents the results regarding the motivations that drive youth workers to engage in youth work and the challenges they experience while performing their roles in non-profit organisations in South Africa. Table 3 below shows participants' biographical information, and Table 4 below shows the participants' pseudonyms.

Table 3. Participants' biographical information.

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)
Gender	Female	10
	Male	0
Marital Status	Single	8
	Married	2
Highest Qualification	Grade 12/Matric/NSC	9
	Higher Certificate/Diploma	0
	Bachelor's Degree	1
	Honours/master's degree	0
	Other (Certificate/N/A)	0
Ethnicity	African	10
Age Range (years)	20–25	4
	26–30	4
	31–35	2
Living Arrangement	With family (parents, siblings, children)	6
	Alone	1
	With partner/spouse	2
	With extended family (grandmother, aunt, etc.)	1
	Other (room attendant, employer housing, etc.)	0
Residence Type	Rural	5
	Urban	0
	Peri-urban/Township/Complex	5

The study comprised a small sample of participants, all of whom were female ($n = 10$), indicating that youth work practice within the NPO sector is predominantly undertaken by young women, compared to young men. The participants were between the ages of 21 and 33 years. Only one female participant held a bachelor's degree in youth development, while the remaining participants possessed only a matric qualification. This finding suggests

that youth work within the NPO sector in the selected provinces of South Africa is largely implemented by individuals without formal qualifications in youth work. With regard to living arrangements, six participants resided with their parents, siblings and children; one lived alone; one with extended family; and two with their partners. Furthermore, five participants were from peri-urban areas and five from rural areas. Table 5 is the summary of superordinate themes, sub-themes and quotes raised by the participants.

Table 4. Participants pseudonym.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Province
Nathi	22	Female	Western Cape
Shane	30	Female	Western Cape
Shaz	25	Female	Western Cape
Kari	33	Female	Western Cape
Masi	26	Female	Western Cape
Hlamu	24	Female	Limpopo
Jane	27	Female	Limpopo
Nancy	33	Female	Limpopo
Ntsako	28	Female	Limpopo
Khenso	21	Female	Limpopo

Table 5. Summary of superordinate themes, sub-themes and quotes.

Superordinate Theme	Sub-Themes		Quotes
“While supporting young people, I also seek to gain relevant work experience” (Shane, 30-year-old woman, Western Cape Province) “Involvement in an NPO will enhance my future employability, as it will enable me to acquire relevant work experience” (Jane, 27-year-old woman, Limpopo Province)	1. Motivational factors	Gain practical work experience	“While supporting young people, I also seek to gain relevant work experience” (Shane, 30-year-old woman, Western Cape Province) “Involvement in an NPO will enhance my future employability, as it will enable me to acquire relevant work experience” (Jane, 27-year-old woman, Limpopo Province)
		A desire to make a difference	“I believe in youth, and I have trust that working with young people will achieve more in our organization” (Nancy, 33-year-old woman, Limpopo Province).
	2. Everyday challenges in youth work practice	Lack of funding	“I was forced to cancel a campaign due to a lack of resources, despite its being a highly meaningful and valuable opportunity for young people. Unfortunately, financial constraints and insufficient material support made it impossible to proceed with the initiative” (Kari, 33-year-old woman, Western Cape Province). “We implement youth programmes in our NPO without funding, which poses a significant challenge and affects the quality of our work” (Khenso, 21-year-old woman, Limpopo Province).
		Lack of professional development	“We do not receive any formal training or attend workshops that would enable us to develop the skills required to work effectively with vulnerable youth” (Masi, 26-year-old woman, Western Cape Province)
		Community resistance	“The community perceives our work as meaningless and therefore does not provide support for our activities” (Shane, 30-year-old woman, Western Cape Province)

Two superordinate themes emerged from the online self-administered interviews and WhatsApp interviews exploring the motivations that drive youth workers to engage in youth work and the challenges they experience while performing their roles in non-profit organisations in South Africa. The first superordinate theme, motivational factor, comprises two subthemes: to gain practical work experience and a desire to make a difference. The second superordinate, everyday challenges in youth work practice, consists of three subthemes: lack of funding, no professional development, community resistance and sabotage.

3.1. *Motivational Factors*

This superordinate theme illustrates the factors that motivated young people to practice youth work within the non-profit organisation sector in South Africa. Two subthemes that emanated from this theme, namely to gain practical work experience and a desire to make a difference, are discussed in detail in this subsection.

3.1.1. *Gain Practical Work Experience*

Youth unemployment in South Africa remains a national crisis, affecting young people across all levels of educational attainment, although those with post-tertiary qualifications tend to be less vulnerable. One of the major contributing factors to youth unemployment is employers' increasing demand for prior work experience. As a result, many young people struggle to enter the labour market despite holding relevant qualifications. In response to this challenge, participants in this study reported that they deliberately chose to volunteer within the non-profit organisation (NPO) sector, particularly in youth work practice, as a strategy to gain practical work experience that could enhance their employability. One participant explained as follows:

"I decided to volunteer in this organisation and assist young people by offering them life skills interventions after school. I am doing this so I can gain experience in working with young people since I am planning to pursue qualifications in social work one day. So, then it will be easy for me to secure employment as a social worker because I would be having a qualification experience." (Nathi, 22-year-old woman, Western Cape Province)

Similarly, another participant stated the following:

"You need experience in order to find a job nowadays, so I decided to join this NPO so I can gain experience such as project management and communication skills while working with young people." (Hlamu, 24-year-old woman, Limpopo Province)

Both Nathi and Hlamu articulate a shared view that their involvement in youth work practice within a non-profit organisation is strongly motivated by the desire to gain work experience that will enhance their future employment prospects. The participants indicate that, in order to participate competitively in the labour market, acquiring practical experience has become essential. This motivation reflects a forward-looking orientation and demonstrates how young people in the Global South are proactively preparing for their future careers through voluntary engagement.

Another participant further highlighted the role of academic background in motivating engagement in youth work:

"My professional motivation is that I did a degree that focuses more on youth. I believe in youth engagement and the community." (Nancy, 33-year-old woman, Limpopo Province)

Reflecting on the verbatim above, and anchored in the participant's background as a youth development graduate, it is evident that her strongest motivating factor for practicing youth work within a non-profit organisation is shaped by a deliberate career choice informed by her academic training, as well as by her social values of empowering young people and promoting youth engagement within the community. This career choice can further be associated with the desire to acquire relevant skills and the practical work experience necessary for effective youth work practice, which may ultimately enhance her prospects of securing decent employment in the youth development sector in the near future.

3.1.2. A Desire to Make a Difference

Working with young people is widely perceived by participants as intrinsically rewarding, not in terms of financial gain but through the opportunity to positively transform young people's lives and contribute to the betterment of future generations. Several participants indicated that their involvement in youth work within non-profit organisations was primarily driven by a deep-seated desire to make a meaningful difference in the lives of young people. One participant, a 30-year-old woman from the Western Cape Province who had been engaged in youth work practice within an NPO for over five years, explained that her motivation to remain in the sector despite the absence of consistent financial remuneration stemmed from her commitment to empowering young girls:

"I joined this NPO where, together with my colleagues, we design educational programmes that empower the girl child to keep themselves safe and to abstain from sexual activities while they are still young. Some of us never had mentors growing up, so I want to be the change by empowering the girl child so that they can focus on their education." (Shane, 30-year-old woman, Western Cape Province)

This account highlights the role of personal history and unmet developmental support in shaping a commitment to service among youth workers. The participant's desire to become a mentor figure reflects a strong altruistic orientation and a sense of social responsibility. Young people in many South African communities continue to face complex social challenges that necessitate sustained youth work intervention. Another participant, Shaz, a 25-year-old woman from the Western Cape Province, similarly identified her motivation to work in an NPO as rooted in her concern about the destructive behaviours she observes among youth in her community, particularly substance abuse and criminal involvement. She expressed the following:

"There are so many issues that young people in my community are dealing with because of a lack of empowerment programmes. I decided to get involved in an NPO that works with vulnerable youth young people from child-headed households who have no one to guide them. They use drugs and get involved in crime, and that concerned me. I decided that I want to make a difference in their lives. Even if I can change one life, that would be a great achievement, so that the young person can grow up to be a great individual and become a role model in the community." (Shaz, 25-year-old woman, Western Cape Province)

Shaz's narrative illustrates how exposure to social dysfunction and vulnerability within local communities can inspire youth workers to intervene in ways that promote positive development and social change. Similarly, Jane, a 27-year-old woman from Limpopo Province, revealed that her personal experience of early pregnancy due to inadequate sexual and reproductive health information served as a strong motivating factor for her involvement in youth work:

“I had a child when I was still very young because I did not have enough information about the different forms of contraception I could use. I decided to get involved in this NPO where we run after-school programmes and teach young girls about contraception, especially those who are already sexually active, and we encourage those who are not to continue abstaining and to focus on their education. I do not want them to go through what I went through. For me, it is about making a change in the life of a girl child.” (Jane, 27-year-old woman, Limpopo Province)

Jane’s account shows how the lived experience of vulnerability can transform into a powerful catalyst for advocacy, prevention and empowerment-oriented youth work practice. Collectively, these narratives demonstrate that a strong desire to make a positive difference in the lives of young people constitutes a significant motivational factor driving youth workers’ engagement in the NPO sector. Participants’ motivations are deeply embedded in personal experiences, moral obligation and community responsibility. In particular, Jane’s experience illustrates how personal adversity can be transformed into purposeful social action aimed at preventing similar challenges among vulnerable young girls. Through after-school programmes and empowerment initiatives, these youth workers seek to address critical societal issues such as early pregnancy, substance abuse and lack of guidance that continue to threaten young people’s educational and life trajectories.

3.2. *Everyday Challenges in Youth Work Practice*

This superordinate theme illustrates challenges that young people face while practicing youth work within the non-profit organisation sector in South Africa. The subthemes that emanated from this theme, namely lack of funding, lack of professional development, community resistance and sabotage, are discussed in detail in this subsection.

3.2.1. Lack of Funding

The successful implementation of youth development programmes requires adequate financial and human resources. In the absence of these resources, the capacity of non-profit organisations (NPOs) to make a meaningful and sustained impact on the lives of young people is significantly constrained. Participants consistently identified a lack of funding as the most significant challenge confronting them in the youth work sector. Insufficient financial support undermines programme delivery, limits service reach and destabilises both organisational functioning and workers’ personal wellbeing. One participant highlighted how inadequate funding directly affects vulnerable youth who rely on NPOs for basic needs such as food:

“Our organisation is not funded by the Department of Social Development. We struggle sometimes to assist the youth. Some of these youth come into our organisation hoping that they will get a meal. So, it is painful when I have to look them in the eyes and tell them that we have nothing to give. This affects our programme because they end up not coming back.” (Kari, 33-year-old woman, Western Cape Province)

Kari’s account illustrates how financial constraints not only disrupt programme implementation but also weaken the trust and continuity essential for sustained youth participation. The inability to meet basic needs compromises both attendance and the overall effectiveness of youth interventions.

Similarly, another participant emphasised that the consequences of inadequate funding extend beyond programme limitations and directly affect the economic wellbeing of youth workers themselves:

“We work with no salary because our organisation is not funded. This affects our wellbeing and affects us economically because we cannot look after our families while going to work every day. The government needs to take the work we are doing seriously and provide funding to NPOs.” (Masi, 26-year-old woman, Western Cape Province)

Masi’s narrative exposes the precarious nature of unpaid labour within the NPO sector and highlights how financial instability undermines both livelihood security and professional sustainability. Despite their daily commitment, youth workers remain economically vulnerable, a situation that raises serious concerns about exploitation, burnout and long-term workforce retention.

The instability of external funding was further reinforced by Nancy, who explained:

“The challenges that I face when working in our NPO are that sometimes we struggle to get sponsors, and sometimes they withdraw and no longer come to support the NPO.” (Nancy, 33-year-old woman, Limpopo Province)

Nancy’s experience reflects the unpredictable nature of donor dependency, where inconsistent sponsorship creates uncertainty in planning and exposes organisational operations to abrupt disruption.

The above narratives reveal a precarious and highly unstable working environment for youth workers within NPOs, primarily driven by chronic financial insecurity. Masi’s testimony, in particular, highlights the depth of the crisis: working without a salary not only compromises personal wellbeing but also entrenches economic vulnerability despite continuous professional commitment. This is further compounded by the unreliable nature of sponsorship described by Nancy, which places NPOs in a constant state of financial uncertainty. Kari’s account demonstrates how these financial limitations directly affect vulnerable young people, ultimately threatening programme sustainability and access to essential services. These findings reveal that a lack of funding is not merely an organisational challenge but a systemic issue that affects programme effectiveness, worker wellbeing and youth participation. Participants’ calls for government recognition and sustained financial support reflect a broader demand for the formalisation, stabilisation and professionalisation of youth work within the NPO sector.

3.2.2. Lack of Professional Development

Youth work practice has evolved significantly over the years, particularly with the increasing integration of digital technologies and evidence-based intervention models. As a result, youth workers are required to continuously gain new knowledge and skills in order to implement and coordinate effective youth development programmes. However, participants in this study identified a lack of professional development opportunities as a critical challenge that negatively affects their competence, confidence and overall productivity within the non-profit organisation (NPO) sector. One participant, who volunteers in an organisation focused on youth empowerment in the digital space, described her frustration with the absence of proper training:

“I volunteer in an organisation that seeks to empower youth in a digital space, but I do not receive proper training on how to use the system or how to effectively connect with youth on digital platforms. All I do is print copies. Our organisation is financially stable because it receives some donations from good companies, but my employer does not think of enrolling us in online courses. I feel that for them, youth development is not about passion but about securing funding from companies and the government.” (Shane, 30-year-old woman, Western Cape Province)

Shane's account highlights how the lack of training in digital competencies undermines the effectiveness of youth programmes that are meant to be technologically driven. Her narrative further suggests a disconnect between organisational funding priorities and investment in human capital development.

Similarly, another participant expressed deep concern about the absence of long-term professional growth opportunities despite many years of service:

"I have been working in this NPO for more than six years now, but I have never been sent to attend training or workshops or assisted to enrol in short learning programmes as part of professional development. I wish to obtain a qualification one day so that I can work better with the community. This affects my work because some of the youths are very smart when they ask me questions and I fail to answer, they judge me." (Ntsako, 28-year-old woman, Limpopo Province)

Ntsako's experience reveals how prolonged exclusion from professional development not only limits career progression but also undermines the credibility and confidence of youth workers in their daily interactions with young people. The inability to respond effectively to youths' needs and questions creates professional insecurity and weakens the participants/youth relationship. These narratives demonstrate that the lack of professional development remains a serious structural challenge within youth work practice in NPOs.

3.2.3. Community Resistance

The effective implementation of youth development interventions is largely dependent on constructive collaboration between youth workers and key community stakeholders. However, findings from this sub-theme reveal a breakdown in this collaborative relationship, with community resistance emerging as a persistent challenge confronting youth workers in their daily practice. Participants reported that such resistance not only undermines their professional efforts but also negatively affects the intended outcomes of youth development initiatives. One participant explained as follows:

"Community members have no interest in getting involved in what we are doing; some become jealous and think we are funded. If they can encourage their children to get involved in our programme, we can make a huge impact". (Kari, 33-year-old woman, Western Cape Province)

This account highlights both community apathy and misconceptions about funding as key factors contributing to resistance. Rather than supporting youth development initiatives, some community members display disengagement and suspicion, which weakens opportunities for collective action and shared responsibility in promoting positive youth outcomes.

Similarly, another participant stated the following:

"The community makes my work more difficult, as they are the ones who do not want development because they steal our tools in our NPO, and it makes our work more difficult because of constant shortages of tools". (Nancy, 33-year-old woman, Limpopo Province)

Nancy's narrative illustrates the extreme manifestations of community resistance through acts of sabotage, such as the theft of essential equipment and resources. Such behaviour not only disrupts programme implementation but also reflects a broader lack of appreciation for the role of youth workers and the value of youth empowerment initiatives within the community. Nancy perceived these actions as deliberate efforts to undermine development initiatives, thereby reinforcing cycles of resistance that hinder sustainable youth development at the community level.

4. Discussion

This section discusses the findings on the motivations that drive young people as youth workers to engage in youth work and the challenges they experience while performing their roles in non-profit organisations in South Africa. This section is divided into two subsections, namely the motivations that drive young people as youth workers to engage in youth work in the NPO sector and the challenges youth workers experience while performing their roles in the NPO sector.

4.1. Motivations That Drive Young People as Youth Workers to Engage in Youth Work in the NPO Sector

The South African government acknowledges the critical role of civil society in advancing youth development ([National Youth Policy, 2021](#)). Through structured community services within non-profit organisations (NPOs), young people participate in youth work activities aimed at promoting community development ([National Youth Development Agency, 2025](#)). Despite this recognition, the NPO sector remains relatively unattractive to many young people, and the motivations driving those who do engage as youth workers remain underexplored. This study addresses this gap by examining the motivations that drive youth workers to become involved in youth work practice within the NPO sector. Guided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT) ([Ryan & Deci, 2017](#)), which differentiates between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, the findings revealed two primary motivational drivers: gaining practical experience and the desire to make a difference in young people's lives. These motivations reflect both extrinsic and intrinsic forms of regulation underlying youth workers' engagement.

The first motivation identified was to gain practical work experience. The study found that youth workers engage in youth work within NPOs with a future-oriented perspective, viewing volunteerism as a strategic pathway to enhancing their employability. By participating in youth work practice, they acquire practical skills and workplace exposure that can later be leveraged when seeking formal employment. This finding aligns with previous studies; for example ([A. Stukas & Wilson, 2022](#); [A. A. Stukas et al., 2016](#)), which indicate that long-term career aspirations and employability considerations significantly influence individuals' decisions to engage in volunteer-based youth work. Furthermore, the present study revealed that youth workers' engagement in youth work is often rooted in their academic training, particularly qualifications focused on youth development. This connection between academic background and professional practice reflects a strong alignment between personal values, professional identity and community engagement. This finding is consistent with [Sutcliffe and Cooper \(2024\)](#), who emphasises that individuals' educational qualifications and personal career choices serve as key motivators for entering the youth work profession. From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, this motivation reflects the fulfilment of the psychological need for competence ([Deci & Ryan, 2012](#)), which refers to the desire to feel effective, capable and skilled. Youth workers engage in youth work practice within NPOs to develop practical competencies that enhance both their professional confidence and future employability ([Deci & Ryan, 2000](#)). In SDT terms, this form of motivation is largely extrinsic, as participation in youth work is driven by the anticipated external reward of improved employment prospects and the accumulation of work experience that strengthens one's curriculum vitae ([Ryan & Deci, 2017](#)).

The second motivation identified in this study is the intrinsic desire to make a meaningful difference in the lives of young people. This form of motivation aligns closely with intrinsic motivation as described in Self-Determination Theory, where individuals engage in activities for personal satisfaction, fulfilment and inherent enjoyment ([Deci et al., 2013](#)). Youth workers expressed a strong commitment to supporting young people in navigating

the social, economic and personal challenges they face in their daily lives. Their involvement in youth work was experienced as emotionally rewarding and purpose-driven. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Grant et al., 2020; Rais et al., 2021; Hammond & McArdle, 2024; The Youth Network, 2020), which indicates that a passion for youth development and a belief in one's capacity to bring about positive change are central motivations for entering youth work. While this study corroborates these existing findings, it makes a novel contribution by demonstrating that young people's lived experiences of vulnerability can serve as a powerful catalyst for advocacy and professional engagement in youth work. Youth workers who had personally experienced hardship were motivated to prevent similar challenges among other young people, transforming personal adversity into a source of purpose and social responsibility. This dimension of lived experience as a motivational driver is largely absent in the previous studies (Molokoane & Modipane, 2025; Agnihotri et al., 2025) and therefore represents an important empirical and theoretical contribution to the literature on youth work motivation.

4.2. Challenges Youth Workers Experience While Performing Their Roles in the NPO Sector

This section discusses the findings on the challenges experienced by youth workers in the non-profit organisation sector. Three dominant sub-themes emerged from the data, namely: lack of funding, lack of professional development and community resistance and sabotage. Among these, lack of funding was identified as the most pervasive and structurally embedded challenge affecting the effectiveness and sustainability of youth work interventions. Youth workers reported that operating under conditions of limited or no funding severely compromises the implementation of youth development programmes. These findings are supported by previous studies, which highlight that a lack of funding is a major challenge confronting non-profit organisations in South Africa and significantly hinders the effective implementation of their interventions (Chauke & Malatji, 2022; Seabe, 2012; Van Niekerk & Matthias, 2019; Sibanda & Ngwabi, 2025). Youth workers indicated that financial constraints often leave them uncertain about how best to support young people in their communities, thereby undermining both programme quality and reach. These findings are consistent with previous studies indicating that youth work interventions are frequently underfunded, a situation that was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted already fragile funding streams and intensified financial insecurity within the youth development sector. The withdrawal or reduction in funding during this period had profound negative consequences for youth development initiatives and the communities they serve (Pope, 2016; Petkovic, 2022).

Furthermore, the study revealed that the absence of sustainable funding structures places youth workers in a state of economic vulnerability, as many perform their duties without receiving any form of stipend or financial compensation. This not only threatens their personal livelihoods but also limits their ability to remain committed to the sector over time. These findings align with Gharabaghi (2010), who argues that youth workers often engage in demanding and emotionally intensive labour to empower young people without receiving adequate remuneration. Similarly, Chauke and Malatji (2021) report that even when some youth workers do receive payment, it is frequently insufficient, resulting in demotivation and eventual exit from the sector. From a theoretical perspective, these challenges critically undermine the autonomy component of the Self-Determination Theory (SDT). According to Ryan and Deci (2017), autonomy is a fundamental psychological need that enables individuals to experience a sense of volition and control over their work. The persistent lack of financial resources and remuneration restricts youth workers' capacity to exercise meaningful choice, sustain motivation and experience professional fulfilment within the youth work sector.

The second challenge reported in this study is the lack of professional development. The findings indicate that limited access to training, workshops and formal learning opportunities, despite the growing complexity of youth work in digitally mediated and evidence-driven contexts, constrains youth workers' productivity, particularly because the majority lack formal academic preparation in youth work. Consequently, non-participation in professional development initiatives further marginalises the mainstreaming of youth development, especially for those engaged in digital youth work. This finding aligns with the study by Bawick (2006), which demonstrates that many individuals performing youth work lack formal professional training, making it difficult to implement youth services effectively. Chauke and Kakuru (2025a) further emphasise that youth workers operating within the non-governmental sector require structured training in the use of digital technologies in order to implement digital youth work effectively. Within the framework of Self-Determination Theory, the lack of professional development undermines youth workers' psychological need for competence, particularly the acquisition of necessary skills to respond effectively to youth-related challenges in the NPO sector (Deci & Ryan, 2012). If this challenge remains unaddressed, it is likely to contribute significantly to declining motivation, reduced professional efficacy and increased youth worker attrition within the NPO sector in the long-term.

Lastly, the study found that community resistance constitutes major social challenges experienced by youth workers within the NPO sector, which negatively affect the effectiveness of youth work implementation. Youth workers reported that community members often do not value the work they perform and hold the misperception that youth workers receive substantial funding. This finding reflects a profound breakdown in collaborative relationships between youth workers and key community stakeholders. Sala-Torrent and Planas-Lladó (2024) argue that youth work continues to receive limited recognition and is frequently perceived as unimportant, despite the significant positive impact youth workers make in the lives of young people. Within the context of Self-Determination Theory, this challenge undermines the psychological need for relatedness, which is central to motivating youth workers to remain engaged in youth work practice within the NPO sector (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Notably, the findings of this study contribute to the existing body of knowledge by identifying community sabotage as a distinct challenge in youth work practice, where community members steal tools used by youth workers to empower young people. Such findings have never been reported in previous studies. This reflects the extent to which community violence adversely affects youth work activities at the community level and underscores the need for targeted government intervention. Such intervention is essential to restore trust, safeguard resources and strengthen sustainable partnerships for effective youth development.

4.3. Theory Implications

The findings extend Self-Determination Theory by illustrating how autonomy, competence and relatedness operate within the specific context of youth work in South African non-profit organisations. The study demonstrates that structural conditions such as funding availability and stakeholder support may directly shape the fulfilment of these psychological needs. This suggests that SDT can be meaningfully applied beyond individual motivation to examine organisational and sector-level dynamics influencing youth work practice. The study therefore contributes to theoretical discussions by highlighting how contextual barriers and supports interact with SDT's core components to influence youth workers' motivation and their capacity to deliver positive youth development within the NPO sector in South Africa. The findings of this study reveal a significant contradiction within the NPO youth work sector: while youth workers who enter youth work are driven

by strong intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, the structural and social conditions under which they work consistently undermine the very psychological needs required to sustain that motivation.

4.4. Strengths, Limitations and Future Research

This study makes a novel contribution to the knowledge on youth work practice within the non-profit organisation sector in South Africa by identifying key factors that motivate youth workers to engage in youth work, as well as the challenges they encounter in their practice. Understanding these motivational dynamics and structural barriers may assist the government in developing responsive and supportive systems that can address the challenges faced by youth workers within the NPO sector and enhance the sector's attractiveness through the provision of institutional and material support. This study contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals by highlighting key work-related challenges faced by youth workers in South African non-profit organisations, including inadequate funding, unpaid or poorly remunerated work and limited access to professional development opportunities. The findings contribute directly to SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth by drawing attention to the need for improved working conditions, fair remuneration and sustainable employment practices for youth workers. In addition, the study contributes to SDG 4: Quality Education by emphasising the importance of providing youth workers with quality education, specialised training and continuous professional development in youth work practice. Strengthening the education and working conditions of youth workers is essential for ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of youth development interventions in South Africa. However, the limitations of this study should be acknowledged in two main respects. First, the sample size was limited to only 10 participants, which restricts the extent to which the findings can be generalised to youth workers operating within NPOs in other parts of South Africa. Second, the study sampled only young female youth workers, and therefore, the perspectives of young male youth workers are not represented. Consequently, future research in South Africa should adopt longitudinal designs, draw on larger and more diverse samples of youth workers and ensure the inclusion of both male and female participants in order to generate more balanced and generalisable evidence on youth work practice within the NPO sector at scale.

While Self-Determination Theory (SDT) emphasises three fundamental psychological needs, autonomy, competence and relatedness, as key sources of motivation, these needs may only partially explain youth workers' motivations within the South African NPO context. [Martela and Ryan \(2015\)](#) extend SDT by proposing beneficence as an additional fundamental psychological need, arguing that the experience of helping others has an independent and significant effect on individual wellbeing. Although this study drew on SDT to interpret youth workers' motivations, beneficence was not explicitly examined as a distinct motivational construct. Given that a substantial proportion of participants' narratives reflected motivations rooted in helping young people avoid risky sexual behaviour, substance abuse and poor life choices, future research could explicitly examine beneficence as a motivational factor for youth work practice in the NPO sector. Such research would contribute to the ongoing theoretical development of SDT and deepen understanding of how benevolence-oriented motivations shape youth workers' engagement and wellbeing in the South African context.

5. Conclusions

Youth workers within non-profit organisations continue to make a lasting and meaningful impact on the lives of young people. Their passion and commitment to youth development remain evident despite the persistent challenges facing the sector, including

limited professional development opportunities and chronic underfunding. To strengthen the capacity of NPOs to deliver high-quality youth development services, there is a pressing need for the South African government, through the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA), in partnership with the Department of Social Development and local municipalities, to increase financial investment in the youth work activities implemented within the NPO sector. Such investment should include the provision of consistent, annual funding to support programme implementation, organisational sustainability and service continuity. This would enhance NPOs' ability to retain qualified, competent and experienced youth workers. Furthermore, the National Youth Policy should emphasise the critical role of rebuilding and professionalising youth work within the NPO sector. This entails ensuring that individuals entering the sector as youth workers or those establishing youth-focused NPOs possess relevant professional qualifications, such as youth work, social work or community development. Strengthening the professional identity of the youth work sector would enhance the quality, accountability and impact of youth development services delivered through NPOs.

The findings of this study point to the urgent need for the professionalisation of youth work in South Africa. There is a need for a National Youth Work Strategy that can define a career path for youth workers entering non-profit organisations. This will assist in ensuring that youth workers operating with non-profit organisations receive decent payment. In addition, youth workers operating in the NPO space must have regular access to continuous professional development workshops. These opportunities are essential for equipping practitioners with contemporary methods, innovative strategies and evidence-based approaches for engaging young people effectively. Ensuring ongoing training will not only enhance youth workers' competence but also contribute to improved developmental outcomes for the youth they serve. The passion and commitment to improving youth outcomes come with chronic stress for some youth workers; therefore, it is recommended that professional development for youth workers include self-care practices so that youth workers can gain skills on how to take care of themselves and avoid burnout and chronic stress within the NPO space. To attract more individuals to the profession of youth work in South Africa, the government, through the Ministry of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities, should establish a national programme focused on the mobility of youth workers. Such a programme would promote international study trips, job-shadowing opportunities and participation in workshops, seminars and conferences abroad, thereby enhancing professional development, global exposure and the attractiveness of youth work as a career.

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