

Youth development in SA:

employment and skills development

Youth development policies in South Africa need to take a broad approach that addresses problems such as youth unemployment instead of looking only at single issues as proposed by programmes such as youth wage subsidies, write **Siphelo Ngcwangu** and **Andile Ndevu**.

Since the dawn of democracy in South Africa in 1994 the question of youth development has been central to most policies of successive African National Council (ANC) governments. There has been uneven success in some of the policy proposals while some have made marginal improvements on the lives of young people. It is generally understood that youth is a *transitional phase* in the complete life cycle of human beings. As such policies are aimed at addressing the needs of this part of society thereby enabling youth to enjoy fulfilling lives as they grow into mature citizens.

According to the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) and the Studies in Poverty and Inequality Institute (SPII) unemployment amongst young South Africans is chronic and structural. Poor quality of education, often inaccessible further training and education opportunities, spatial poverty and few opportunities for job experience are seen in the fact that three quarters of the youth aged

15 to 24 are unemployed, and the majority has never had a formal job before.

This article re-looks at the policy options currently on offer in South Africa and argues that the absence of a meaningful 'institutional matrix' by the state institutions charged with the responsibility of youth development has made it difficult to understand the actual value of government interventions. There is also a lack of in-depth qualitative research to inform the policy positions of the youth movement. In other words, we do not have 'life circumstances' approaches that could provide us with a concrete understanding of the lived experience of the youth.

EXISTING POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES

The dominant policy and programmes of youth development in South Africa are informed primarily by the assumption that restructuring of various supply-side measures (through the education system) would create opportunities for the youth within the labour

market. While this assumption is useful for explanatory purposes there still exist holes in the literature. Nico Cloete argues that despite the steady improvements in the education and training system, South African employers have not been absorbing young black graduates and matriculants at the pace that can accommodate the growing supply.

There are various explanations that are made for this: some being the slow pace of employment equity, the continuing racialised division of labour, the still racialised patterns of access to employment opportunities and the various weaknesses within some government programmes. However, within this weakness of the labour market it is important to acknowledge that the structure of our economy – with high levels of concentration and monopoly power reduces the possibility of meaningful change unless the structural question is addressed.

The other danger in existing policies is the focus exclusively on the formal economy (or



Young workers learn the tools of their trade.

market) as the natural destination of youth employees. While the reality in the formal economy is that increasing mechanisation of production processes, increase in services industry, financialisation of the economy and growing retrenchments in some sectors of manufacturing have resulted in 'jobless growth.'

We observe that the current focus of public debate on the youth wage subsidy has tended to deflect attention away from other policies of the government, which if expanded or implemented effectively could make a meaningful change at perhaps lower costs than the R5-billion price tag of the youth wage subsidy. It should be noted that the term 'youth wage' can be misleading or give an impression of the novelty of youth subsidies. However we know that programmes like learnerships are

in themselves youth wage subsidies of a different form with a very clear learning component that results in a certificate and therefore provides an opportunity for access to long-term opportunities for further learning and employment opportunities on the labour market. The youth wage subsidy debate is also misleading because it has placed 'wages' as the essential problem (and solution) to a problem that requires more understanding because of its structural orientation. In other words the question of youth unemployment can be phrased differently: Why is the South African economy reproducing youth unemployment? This opposes the current framework which makes the youth the problem or 'cause' of unemployment.

The terms used on youth development have also grown to emphasise concepts

such as 'employability' and 'unemployability'. Notions of *employability* have been insufficient to understand the nature of the crisis. The concept of employability is possible to resolve through remedial interventions such as 'work readiness' and preparation and a positive attitude in a psychological sense. This has resulted in a public discourse of blaming the education system, parents, lecturers and society for failure to prepare the youth for employment.

Like many of these types of explanations they remain in existence given that institutions such as sector education and training authorities (Setas) and various service providers have been increasing their programmes of 'work readiness' gradually over the last few years. On the other hand we have the growing concept of *unemployability* which

explains youth unemployment in ways that condemn the youth to a life of perpetual exclusion. We state openly that the notion of an 'unemployable' person is an insult to our entire society and holds no basis in fact or empirical analysis.

The unemployability notion also confirms the failure of commentators to understand the capitalist crisis in its entirety because unless reference is being made to severely disabled citizens there can be no meaningful understanding of *unemployability*. All able bodied young people can be employed and made economically active depending on the success of policy interventions directed at them and the structure of the existing labour market.

There is also a growing phenomenon of *underemployment* which we understand to imply the process of young graduates being absorbed into employment

which does not fully utilise their formal academic training or their lifelong experience. This phenomenon applies equally to 'scarce skills' graduates in as much as it applies to graduates in the humanities disciplines. The retail sector, call centres and financial services sectors show that this experience is common, but by mere observation and interacting with young people we are able to indicate that this trend is continuing with very little attention paid to it by the policy community.

The current focus on work-placements by the Department of Higher Education is welcome and will contribute immensely to the creation of work opportunities for those students requiring work placement in order to complete their qualifications. But underemployment and the increase in graduate unemployment require

a specific focus if we are to make proper sense of the youth development challenges. The historical explanations of graduate unemployment being about students 'choosing the wrong courses' no longer holds.

The *Green Paper of Post School Education and Training* recently released by the Department of Higher Education and Training points to a positive trend in the increase in Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) enrolments at a rate of 4.4% annual and an increase of 5.5% in graduations. This is contrasted with a significant decline in overall enrolments and graduations in the humanities. If this trend continues we can then anticipate a steady improvement in SET graduates in the economy. The *Green Paper* together with the National Development Plan is emphatic that the country will require the number of these SET



On a learning curve: young workers listen to their trainer.

William Matlala



Knowledge sharing: young workers discuss during the course.

enrolments to grow about ten times in order for the country to reach its growth targets.

In addition to some of the policies mentioned earlier, there are also sector-specific programmes that include internships, job placements, bursary programmes and public works initiatives targeted at creating employment opportunities for the youth. It is important to note that the *school-to-work transition* is complex and cannot be understood without careful analysis. The nature of the challenge is *systemic* and needs to be appreciated as varying geographically between rural and urban areas. Within the youth sector there has been a tendency to create binary oppositions of 'either-or' rather than exploring the viability of a combination of policies that work in specific concrete realities. For example, the current debate is about either

a youth wage or a job seekers grant as if we should not explore creative ways that present a wider set of offerings for youth development alternatives. This way of thinking is as a result of the dominant research agendas in the field of youth development which are mainly economic and based on assumptions about challenges that are often varied and require deeper qualitative research combined with interaction with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local youth leaders, churches and youth leaders on the ground.

WHAT'S MISSING IN DEBATES?

A race and class analysis is important in the framing of the debate on youth development. We too frequently speak as if the youth sector is a neutral space of rational actors. Yet the youth, youth activists, researchers and policy-

makers make their assumptions of policy developments informed of philosophical assumptions about the resolution of developmental questions which emerge within a broader 'national' and 'class' question. Within such debates the question of an emerging black middle class is important within a wider societal call of change.

It has been quite clear since the dawn of democracy that the layer of black professionals is growing at a very slow pace and the entrepreneurial black layer even slower. While privileging the development of a black middle class should not be the single goal of our development interventions it also should not be taken as given that all interventions directed at young black people should result in confining them to entry level employment opportunities and therefore perpetual working-class social status.

We must not be apologetic in intensifying study programmes and professional development programmes that upgrade the qualifications of our youth who have potential to reach masters, PhD and post-doctoral research levels thereby catapulting them into the 'thought leadership' and middle-class status currently dominated by the white elite. The recent census report of Stats SA has estimated that it would take over 60 years for an average black family to enjoy the economic status of an average white family whose annual income is six times higher than a black family's income.

Our call for an institutional matrix that is based on the necessity for the youth sector to understand all of the state's interventions on youth development rather than a merely narrow focus on specific programmes such as the youth wage subsidy. For instance there are learnerships, internships and graduate placement programmes managed by Setas. What is the impact of such programmes and what is the overall budget expenditure on them?

There is the Expanded Public Works coupled with the Community Works Programmes. How effective are these programmes and what should the youth sector propose to improve their impact? We also have a variety of individual government departments that have their own bursary programmes such as the Department of Health's programme of sending medical students to Cuba. How well do we know the entire offering of bursary programmes by the state and are they well marketed? There are also parastatals with bursary programmes some of which have sent students abroad to study? There is also the R9-billion Jobs Fund which is managed by the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA) that is also a form of 'youth wage' or employment wage. How effective has this fund been so far?

We have stated that we are critical of the notion of a budget of R5-billion merely being utilised for a single programme while the need is greater. We argue that perhaps all current proposals can be funded within the existing R5-billion budget in a manner that could speak to short-term, medium-term and long-term priorities. For an example we could say:

- R2-billion: for work-based youth wage type interventions (short term)
- R2,5-billion: a work seekers fund also for youth centres (medium term)
- R500-million: a bursary fund for post-grad study locally and abroad (long term).

What we are proposing may require some further re-calculations, but the logic that we use is that in order for our programmes to make maximum impacts we require a longer term vision that aligns with the National Development Plan (NDP) but also critiques it where necessary.

RESEARCH APPROACHES

Over the last few years the research approaches that dominate youth policy development have been predominantly driven by quantitative and economic analyses. We are aware that state planners are almost compelled to utilise and promote this kind of approach to research because of the way the state works. However, a country with the social legacy and socio-economic challenges that South Africa has will require a serious focus on qualitative in-depth research which takes into account the 'life circumstances' of the youth as its point of departure. We maintain that a qualitative research approach would also provide us with a view of the extent of changes that are occurring at local levels and would also support the expansion of the youth development structures at a local and municipal level.

CONCLUSION

This article has taken a descriptive approach to provide a basis for critical discussion within the youth sector. Our departure point is that a mere roll-out of R5-billion through large corporate capitalist companies is not a sufficient solution to the crisis confronting the youth of our country. We also hold the view that youth unemployment, skills development and unemployment are complex social phenomenon and cannot be resolved by single issue interventions. Therefore, we require a diverse approach that also includes a focus on existing government programmes that have not been implemented effectively or have not been considered for adoption in a form that accelerates employment opportunities for the youth.

We acknowledge that the extent of the crisis requires short, medium and long-term interventions. It cannot be that the short-term interventions enjoy all the support without a focus on the causes of youth unemployment. There are limits to a developmentalist, state-led approach to development in as much as there are limits to a market-led logic of development. In our view the state has to inherently make class biased interventions that are directed at the poor in the first instance while ensuring that our economic policy provides for a path that opens up the economy for small, micro and medium enterprises to flourish. We also call for popular proposals such as the Zero Hunger programme of the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries to be considered for immediate implementation. The Zero Hunger programme if implemented effectively has the potential to create about 300,000 to 400,000 jobs without expecting capital to intervene. ¹⁸

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