

# On the right side of the road

## A creative approach to job creation

In the light of Cosatu's job creation campaign the *Men on the Side of the Road* project provides a useful way forward. Kally Forrest learnt from **Charles Maisel** and **Richard Ryan** how the project operates.

**I**t was my mother who said, "Go on, go stand with the other jobless men. You can't just hang around here and wait for me to put bread in your mouth." So I've been doing this for five years now. I go everyday in the hope someone will choose me so I can take a bit of cash home. I've dug, cleaned, carried, hammered, planted, mowed, plastered, guarded, climbed, lifted. I wait everyday with these jobless men and every car that goes by is my hope."

This is how Josiah Mosia described his working life. He is one of South Africa's forgotten men who live on the fringes of the active economic world. He is also the target for an unusual project called Men on the Side of the Road (MSR).

Every day across South Africa about 200 000 unemployed men at

about 500 sites wait for work. According to Charles Maisel who started MSR in Cape Town, "These are the visible but not noticed. Visible, but invisible people, of our society." He came up with a novel idea to restore dignity to these men and to assist them in finding more regular work.

### ORIGINS OF MSR

Maisel motored around in his car between 6 and 8 in the morning and identified sites where the unemployed regularly waited for work along public transport routes, in industrial areas, around DIY (Do-It-Yourself) stores and tile warehouses. He spoke to the men and encouraged them to register for free with the Masiphumelela Federation. At the side of the road the men filled in their details - name, contact, skills, references and so on. He then issued them with a membership card. From these small beginnings a national project evolved.

Once men have signed up, the MSR develops a register of unemployed people which records their skills and experience. Each person is issued with a membership card complete with a photo of the worker. In doing this, it soon became clear that many of the men had few skills so the MSR now offers a basic training service to increase skills and so make the men more employable.

Once MSR has the men on its database it publicises a work placement service to employers.



Employers phone in requesting labour and MSR informs them of the rate for the job and charges a small agency fee. If, for example, the worker is being paid R90 a day for gardening, MSR will charge an extra R5. No money passes between the worker and employer. The employer pays MSR which in turn pays the worker. Each worker has to open a bank account with a free banking service where no minimum cash is required to open an account.

The service proved popular with employers as it guaranteed honest, registered workers whose references had been verified. The service also simplifies the process of employment. Employers do not have to deal with negotiating a rate for the job and no cash changes hands. Furthermore workers have often been trained in the area of



request. Employers who want to make regular use of the service, pay a registration fee of R250 per annum which gives them access to the range of skills and services that the unemployed men can provide.

On the workers' part, MSR provides the obvious benefit of creating more regular, adequately paid work, which in some cases evolves into permanent employment. The only restriction on the worker is if they do not comply with MSR rules, such as opening a banking account, the organisation can remove their membership.

MSR also offers an additional service to the men. It encourages members of the public to donate their old, broken and rusted tools. In a factory in Lenasia in Johannesburg, formerly unemployed men refurbish these implements. Jobless men can then visit a 'tools library' at the depot and borrow anything they need on production of their membership

card. "Some tools go astray but that is not a problem if the men are using them to continue working," commented Maisel.

#### WHO ARE THESE WORKERS?

These unemployed men at the side of the road vary in background, skill and age. Their ages range between 16 and 60 years, but the majority are between 30 and 35 years old. Some have previously worked as forklift drivers, tilers, bricklayers, painters and storemen. Others, especially young people, have always been jobless and have no concept of 'full' employment and have few skills. According to Richard Ryan from the Gauteng Men on the Side of the Road, "Some don't have a clue about what work means. They are happy to work two days a week. They are in a mindset where they are used to working like this. They eke out a living." Others who have been retrenched see it as a transition period towards returning to full formal employment.

Unemployed women however sadly do not benefit much from the project. It is chiefly men who wait on the side of the road for odd jobs and jobless women still remain invisible.

#### MOVING BEYOND CAPE TOWN

After the project had proved a success in Cape Town it expanded to other parts of the country. In

Cape Town over a three year period, MSR was able to offer regular work to over a 1 000 men.

Thereafter the organisation expanded to Johannesburg where MSR employed fieldworkers to locate 'men on the side of the road' sites. They found at least 171 sites in Johannesburg where about 10 000 jobless wait. In the Tshwane area, the University of South Africa (Unisa) assisted in mapping out 80 sites where about 3 500 job seekers gather. This process is also underway in places such as Durban, Pholokwane, the Northern Cape and Eastern Cape and in the Free State. Ryan believes that in this way MSR 'could make a major dent on unemployment'.

It can take up to two months to map out an area as fieldworkers drive through the streets seeking sites. MSR then produces a map of such sites and passes it on to municipalities. In this way the jobless become visible for the first time. MSR has begun to engage municipalities around this information and has succeeded in signing a memorandum of understanding with both Johannesburg and Pretoria mayors. Such partnerships will lead to future cooperation with the social development departments of these city councils.

#### KEEPING AFLOAT

MSR has been successful in raising



its running and infrastructural costs by combining a range of income generating measures. It has raised money through private donations, international funders, fees from its placement service, cash returns on the sale of refurbished tools, through various kinds of partnerships, and more recently through a shareholding in a broad based BEE.

It has also persuaded a number of national government departments to support the project. The Department of Social Development has shown a particular interest and funds the printing of the Federation membership cards.

It does have however a major gripe with the Department of Labour's National Skills Fund which it believes could provide more support than it does. The National Skills Fund provides training in areas which are not covered by Setas (Sector Education and Training Authority). Employers pay a 1% levy towards the Skills Development Fund. Of this, 80% goes to the Setas and 20% to the National Skills Fund.

Whilst the National Skills Fund is prepared to pay consultants large amounts of money to do the training, it refuses to provide basic funding for the jobless to travel to training centres or to pay for provisions during training. "Employees in the DOL (Department of Labour) can fly around the country, be accommodated in comfortable hotels and have all their provisions paid for when they go to meetings or for training," commented Ryan. "Unemployed men, on the other hand, must struggle to get to the training and then are supposed to train on an empty stomach. This is while these men have made a huge

sacrifice to come to 40 days of training a year where they are not able to stand on the side of the road and earn some money." MSR believes the National Skills Fund is badly out of touch with the needs and situation of poor unemployed people.

The National Skills Fund argues that it will provide support to the jobless to undergo training if MSR can guarantee work. This is a circular situation because employers are not willing to give advanced guarantees of work. "If we got the National Skills Fund's financial assistance, we could, for example, train 200-300 gardeners, which are in demand, per month," explains Maisel.

#### A SUCCESS STORY

Unemployed men who have taken part in the project believe it has been important in their lives. "I swear they start walking taller," comments Ryan. "The project has restored to them the dignity of work."

Amongst the jobless men in the Federation a brotherhood and social circle has developed. They socialise together, and assist each other in times of ill health and loan each other money. A storeman who has again found full-time work



testifies to this strong bond and still feels connected into it.

MSR's approach is clearly a success story. It is interesting in the light of this success to reflect on why, for example, Cosatu's National Unemployed Workers Coordinating Committee (NUWCC) failed and ultimately closed down. Maisel believes it has a lot to do with MSR identifying the Men at the Side of the Road sites. Usually it is hard to find a group of unemployed to organise but these sites provide a ready-made 'workplace' which is available for organisation. He also believes that in general Cosatu is more focused on job retention, which although important, is a different task from organising the unemployed and giving unemployment a face.

Trade unions could do well to encourage retrenched membership who intend to seek work by joining gangs of work seekers to register with the Masiphumelela Federation. Obviously MSR still needs to find a way of identifying unemployed women work seekers in the same creative manner that it identified the sites of jobless men. But it is certainly an organisation that shows great potential. It provides the jobless with a point of contact with other work seekers and links them into a service which is on their side of the road and does not seek to exploit them.

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