

# Priority goal

## Reducing youth unemployment

Most of South Africa's young people are unemployed. **Thobile Yanta** makes a plea for government and civil society to address the creation of decent youth jobs as a priority development goal.

Since 1994 the South African economy has grown at a steady pace compared to the previous decade. The growth though has not occurred uniformly across the economy. For instance, the change in focus from mainly primary industry to secondary industry has meant that sectors like agriculture and some aspects of mining have declined. This translated into job losses. The sectors that have benefited include finance and business services, transport and construction. These are sectors which mainly exclude young people or provide them with unsustainable jobs.

Despite growth rates in certain sectors, unemployment figures have not improved and this has raised

much debate. At the core of these debates is whether the economy has followed a 'jobless' or 'job-creating' path. This lack of consensus is understandable given the complexity of defining what constitutes a job. For instance, can parking attendants be classified as workers?

The subject of unemployment and poverty has definitely caught the attention of the media and policy makers. Youth unemployment however has not received much attention. This becomes especially evident when comparing the level of need to the amount of resources allocated to tackling the problem.

Twelve years into democracy, youth poverty, unemployment and under-employment remain critical challenges to the state and society. The magnitude of the problem requires dedicated policy attention and resources to raise the standard of living of young people. It should be noted however that youth unemployment is not only a South African problem but a global challenge. Its solution is a key component of the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). As part of its pro-poor agenda, the MDG identifies the need to "develop decent and productive work for youth."

Tackling youth unemployment is key to achieving the MDG targets of halving poverty by 2014. Thus youth jobs and poverty alleviation approaches have to be central to

countries' policy development strategies.

Youth unemployment impacts most negatively on developing countries even though the developed countries are fast catching-up. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that the number of young people will increase by about 28% or 30 million by 2015, indicating a substantial increase in the number of job-seekers. Global initiatives such as the Youth Employment Network (YEN) emphasise that youth unemployment needs to be addressed in national, regional and global spheres.

In South Africa unemployment affects young people the most. About 70% of the unemployed are between the ages of 18 and 35. Young people with low levels of education, women and rural youth are the worst affected. Insecure work, and low levels of self employment characterise the work experience of many young people and this inevitably condemns them to a life of poverty.

It is clear that youth unemployment requires the urgent attention of a number of players including the youth development sector, government and the private sector. The role of the private sector in general, and BEE players in particular, have a major responsibility to ensure economic stability. In this, the importance of ensuring that young people are

employed and have access to economic opportunities cannot be over-emphasised.

Young people have played a crucial role in shaping the transformation agenda of the country and have also benefited from the new democracy in such areas as the right to vote, freedom of expression and anti-discrimination laws. But the youth have yet to benefit from economic liberation. The economic interests of young people are largely ignored in key economic transformation policies such as BEE and sector-specific charters.

Solving the unemployment crisis would have a range of socio-economic benefits including lowering poverty levels, improvement in the quality of life, narrowing the economic divide in society and improving rural livelihoods. The ILO, for example, predicts a 12-19% GDP growth in the sub-Saharan region if the unemployment rate is halved.

The South African government has developed initiatives such as the Accelerated Growth Initiative of South Africa (ASGISA), the Extended Public Works Programme (EPWP), the Joint Initiative in Priority Skills Acquisition (JIPSA) as part of a broad strategy to address unemployment and poverty. All these initiatives are challenged to produce massive results with regard to youth unemployment, poverty and marginalisation.

South Africa is still dealing with the apartheid legacy of unequal distribution of socio-economic services including quality employment, skills and education. Young people value education but problems still exist around career guidance, quality and relevance of education and access to life skills.



The country's commitment to universal access to education also needs to be reviewed in order to assess obstacles that stand in the way of achieving its realisation.

However, there are no 'quick fixes' to unemployment challenges. The country should not, for example, adopt a globalisation agenda without subjecting it to scrutiny and amendments that suit the local development context.

For example, the idea of a dual labour market system should be discouraged. The assumption behind this is that 'dualism' will create space for the massive creation of employment opportunities, especially for young people. What is not explained is that the majority of jobs created under this system will result in the 'status quo', or even worse class and race inequalities in the economy will reach unsustainable levels.

Like any discipline, effective youth development has standards of good practice. One of these is that young people must be empowered to attain sustainable livelihoods. This means making sure they do not

become cheap fodder for the narrow self interests of the rich capitalist class.

The pending review of the National Youth Development Policy Framework (2002-2007), will provide an opportunity for youth development institutes and stakeholders to develop a roadmap for the implementation of a holistic youth development strategy that talks to political, social and economic dimensions of youth development.

Part of the review process will be to identify key national youth development priorities that cater for different groups of young people such as rural, urban, disabled, male and female young people. Most importantly, the review will look into the capacitation of youth development agencies in order to implement, on a large scale, programmes and projects that will benefit young people both qualitatively and quantitatively.

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