

Seta restructuring

Any hope for up-skilling?

Despite having a thick purse, Setas have been fraught with problems. However, their underperformance and sometimes corrupt activities have not escaped policy-makers. They have recently been reorganised to focus on desperately needed skills delivery.

Elijah Chiwota explores how government saw their role in the past and how it is restructuring them to become more effective.

The concept of value for money, which can be used to analyse the Sector Education and Training Authorities (Setas), is about obtaining the maximum benefit with scarce resources.

Almost on a daily basis we all make decisions when choosing what goods and services to buy and make comparisons between quality and cost.

If we are to apply this idea to the provision of skills training we will then go for the balance between economy, efficiency and effectiveness. This means not only looking at the cost of skills training, but also at the balancing act of comparing the cost with quality, use of resources, fitness for purpose and timeliness. At the end of the day what is expected from Setas are valuable skills for workers.

With about R20-billion in the next three years from the National Skills Levy and an additional R5-billion from the National Skills Fund, it makes sense to expect tangible results from Setas. This also involves expecting them to deal with the mismatch between use of resources

and the outcomes which cause much public disappointment.

Public outcries are understandable because people want to know what is happening. Why are Setas producing less value to the amount of money being invested in training and how does this happen?

Take for example instances where some people say Seta administrators have accredited 'their friends' as service providers. Some providers charged very high prices for short courses.

This was highlighted by Gwebs Qonde, acting director general of Higher Education and Training, when he spoke of a 19-day course for domestic workers organised by the Services Seta at a cost of R45 000.

As one of the ways to strengthen Setas, government recently reorganised them in line with its mid-term strategic framework. In the policy the provision of skills training is considered one of the key elements for economic development. This has been the policy position for some time.

When talking about skills there are a number of issues that should be addressed. This means identifying the kinds of skills that the economy needs to close the gap of 800 000 professional vacancies identified by Adcorp. Even more, it calls for identifying the skills that are needed by the seven million unemployed to be able to find jobs.

Priorities should also be defined on whether the country needs short courses that are specific to the workplace or long-term training that leads to qualifications.

The content of the training is another important issue. What should the thrust of the training be: practical or theoretical and in what fields? What kind of courses should be on the menu and who should be the service providers?

According to Blade Nzimande, the minister of Higher Education and Training: 'The bases for the changed landscape was to ensure enhanced sector focus, ensure viability of all Setas, consolidate planning for the supply of skills, and to align with government and industrial growth strategies.'

But what guarantees exist that the new dispensation will deliver skills and avoid repeating past mistakes?

WHY ARE SKILLS IMPORTANT?

As explained in the National Skills Development Strategies one of the benefits of training is improved performance and a better skilled, trained and qualified workforce. Personal fulfilment is also one of the benefits of training to workers.

Training in literacy and numeracy also provides life skills and that is why it is considered to be the first level of training.

Furthermore, training improves workers' learning and performance, ability to work with others, gaining of information and technology skills, and communication. Workers also get skills that are specific to their sectors including health and safety, quality service, responsibility and leadership and customer care.

One of the criticisms levelled at previous training was that it was either too theoretical to be used at the workplace or gave workers skills that could only be used in casual employment.

Instead of supporting casual labour, the thrust of skills development should be towards decent work that leads to better lives for workers and with it the chance to contribute to the development of the country. Skilled workers are not only more flexible but also have the ability to up-skill. This means that when opportunities arise within the economy skilled workers are able to take advantage of them.

WHAT MUST SETAs DO?

Set up by the Skills Development Act, Setas are supported by a host of laws and policies. These include the National Qualifications Framework, the Skills Levies Act which makes provision for the collection and transfer of levies to Setas; the South African Qualifications Act; and the Further Education and Training Act. Other

laws are the Employment Equity Act which sought to end discrimination and to allow for the provision of equal opportunities.

Setas were set up to develop and train workers in specific job skills and by so doing to lay the foundation for continuous lifelong learning to take place. The expected benefits from the skills development and training included higher productivity at the workplace, improving existing skills, and the building of higher level skills.

However, these policy goals on Setas have not brought the desired results owing to a number of problems. These included too many objectives and unclear roles which led to 'negative public perceptions', weak governance and management also adversely affected the skills development and training programmes. In addition, Setas failed to address diversity in skills development and training across different sectors.

Setas are best described within the context of the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS) whose aim is to build skills for economic growth, social development and to provide decent employment.

So far there have been three NSDS plus the current one, NSDS III up to 2015. The general approach of the strategies is captured by the *Framework for the national skills strategy* - by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET): 'The single greatest contributors of poverty are unemployment and low paid work. Government's position is clear: the new development and growth path for South Africa requires the participation of all economically active South Africans in productive activity. Our policy levers to achieve faster growth, higher employment and reduced levels of poverty include skills development which must assist not only the formal private sector growth but

also labour intensive industries, infrastructure investment, public service delivery and rural development.'

Again, there are laws to support the strategies such as the Skills Development Act and the Skills Development Levies Act. Then there is the National Skills Authority (NSA) which has representatives from business, labour, government and other interest groups. Setas are also consulted by the NSA.

SKILLS STRATEGY HISTORY

NSDS I focused on lifelong learning, promoting equity, enhanced productivity at the workplace and flexibility in both private and public sectors that allowed employers and workers to decide on their priorities.

The strategy also aimed at promoting partnerships and cooperation between and among social constituencies to bring efficiency and effectiveness to training and skills development. Small businesses were also taken into consideration as well as the training of newly employed workers.

The second strategy's priority areas were critical skills for sustainable growth, development and equity. It promoted quality training in the workplace. Connecting learning and work-based programmes was also seen as a route for workers to get critical skills required not only by the economy but that could lead to self-employment.

NSDS II supported job creation and poverty eradication and productive citizenship by aligning skills with national strategies for economic growth and development. It also introduced programmes such as Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment and employment equity. It included programmes for people with disabilities and an emphasis on lifelong learning.

The third strategy, NSDS III's mission is to 'increase access to