



High potential

Holistic development programmes hold the key to creating employment for the youth

BY DI CAELERS

▶ 'MY NAME IS XXX. I'M 29.
I'm desperately looking for job, I'm a hard-working person. I'm willing to do any kind of job. I'm a fast learner...'

It's a common refrain in a country with one of the highest youth-unemployment rates globally and where more than half of all 15- to 24-years-olds are not in jobs, education or in training. Compounding the issue is the fact that, in times of crisis, young people are the first to lose their jobs, and the last to regain them.

With the onset of COVID-19 and the associated lockdowns leaving SA's economy teetering, the depth of the challenge is brought into sharp focus by the extent of the country's very young population; about one-third of everyone living in SA is aged between 18 and 34.

Now the government's Presidential Youth Employment (YES) intervention – the most comprehensive plan to address youth unemployment in SA's democratic history – holds the hopes and futures of about 19 million youth in its hands.

Waseem Carrim, CEO of the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) – which is working with the Presidency, the Department of Employment and Labour and other government departments, as well as civil society – says they're tackling the crisis via a five-pronged strategy. First is SA Youth, an online platform that connects young people with opportunities for earning, learning and volunteering, and is accessible free of charge via a mobi-site. In the six months to February, according to Carrim, more than 1.2 million young people signed up and were linked to 200 000 opportunities.

Secondly, a budget has been set aside for an agile-skills development programme, focused on sectors in the SA economy that are growing fast despite the pandemic. Carrim cites global business services such as data-processing and call centres, along with digital and tech, as areas in which the country has the capacity to create jobs, and to do so at scale.

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Next is stimulus within the township and rural economy, which will include catalytic interventions to help promote youth self-employment. This is followed by workplace experience, which will see them continue the work of the YES initiative.

Carrim says a very important focus will be the country's approximately 500 000 learners at TVET colleges who have completed the theoretical component of vocational and occupational education and training to prepare them for a skilled trade. Without the requisite work experience, however, they cannot qualify. 'What we are doing, as government, is placing those learners in experiential earning opportunities, subsidising their work so they can gain their diplomas,' he says.

The fifth component of the strategy is a comprehensive national youth service programme, specially designed to see young people make a meaningful contribution to their communities, while learning skills and earning a wage. According to Carrim, the intention is to place 50 000 youth in service programmes over 12 months. 'We really want service to come back big,' he says.

It's a mammoth task, but Alana Bond, co-founder of youth development lab Lucha Lunako, says the development and empowerment of youth is critical to taking South Africans 'out of the clutches of poverty'. Earlier this year, Lucha Lunako released its Youth Development Re-imagined report, which red-flagged the fact that while significant

efforts are being made in this important sector, sustainable employment prospects for youth remain grim. Outcomes and impacts are also relatively low when considered against investment being made in the sector, says Bond.

The criticism delivered by the report included that the current focus on providing youth with technical skills, preparing them for the workplace and ensuring work-experience opportunities, fails to examine how they are affected and shaped by poverty and inequality. Missing is the provision of holistic, intentional, high-quality development and support that builds human foundations, she says.

'To bridge this glaring youth-development gap, the report recommends more active consideration of proven best practices to inform programme design and implementation. Youth development interventions need to be holistic, and must be coupled with deliberate efforts to create clear pathways for young people,' says Bond, adding that this requires youth to be exposed to career guidance and possibilities beyond their frame of reference.

'Different lenses must be applied to the problem of job creation, and the potential demand for jobs in South Africa must be mapped out differently.'

That's interesting in light of the findings of a 2020 survey by the UCT Graduate School of Business' Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship, which saw nearly 60% of respondents indicate that they

wanted practical tips for planning their future, and to 'read, hear or watch people talk about how to become motivated about the future'. Nearly half said they wanted a mentor, or to connect with groups focused on motivating the youth.

'This shows that this is not only about providing technical skills, but also the need for practical and meaningful content that provides tried-and-tested solutions for moving young people towards their future,' says Bertha Centre director Solange Rosa.

In light of the continued increase in youth unemployment pre-pandemic to now, despite government investment (from 59% in Q1 2020 to 63.3% for 15- to 24-year-olds and 37.3% to 41.3% for the 25 to 34 age group, according to Stats SA), experts argue that it's crucial to understand which interventions are indeed working.

In an article featured in the Conversation earlier this year, three authors from UCT and the University of Johannesburg (UJ) cautioned against the practice of relying only on job placement as an indicator of successful intervention. 'Doing so misses out on outcomes that are equally important, or more so, amid high structural employment,' say UJ professors Lauren Graham and Leila Patel, and their co-author, UCT's Ariane de Lannoy.

Two other factors that require consideration include that many jobs in SA, especially at entry level, are insecure, part-time or casual; and that young people typically do not remain in

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jobs. This, they say, is either because the job is not a good fit; is only short-term; or attendance is negatively impacted by barriers such as transport costs.

The authors urge funders, policy-makers and programme developers to invest in more intensive support that ensures young people can actually face the challenges inherent in their journeys as jobseekers. At the same time, they recognise the crucial contribution these programmes play in keeping the youth connected to opportunities, so reducing social exclusion and social drift.

In a separate 2020 article by the UJ researchers, they recorded how they tracked 2 000 young people between 2013 and 2019, all of whom were participants in youth employability programmes. These were run by the Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, loveLife’s groundBreakers, Afrika Tikkun Services, the National Youth Service (facilitated by the NYDA), Fit for Life Fit for Work, the Thabiso Skills Institute, the Raymond Ackerman Academy, and EOH (one of Africa’s largest technology services companies).

A number of positive outcomes for young people were noted, including improved job-search resilience and small improvements in self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Graham and Patel say these were important markers of success in the context of the significant hurdles young people face, and could be important in the transition to employment in the longer term. ‘While such programmes cannot replace economic growth as

a strategy for improving employment outcomes, they nevertheless play a crucial role in supporting young people, and offering bridges to the world of work over time,’ they write.

Meanwhile, Anzisha Prize deputy director Melissa Mbazo-Ekpenyong cautions that turning SA’s large youth population into an asset for socio-economic growth cannot occur without investment in, and support for, the country’s young entrepreneurs. Her organisation has spent the past 10 years building an ecosystem that drives entrepreneurship and economic growth through young people.

Mbazo-Ekpenyong adds that the onset of COVID-19 has made entrepreneurial training that equips young people with agile, sustainable and transferable skills that can be adapted to changing environments and situations more critical than ever.

Quoting a WEF report predicting that about 65% of children entering primary school now will end up working in jobs that don’t yet exist, Mbazo-Ekpenyong says entrepreneurship has the capacity to provide youth with a level of control over their own futures. In addition, the organisation’s research and experience has shown that young entrepreneurs tend to hire other young people, thus growing employment opportunities.

Ultimately, the specialists agree – the youth are not a ‘problem’ that needs solving. Instead, appropriate development programmes that go well beyond on-the-job training hold the key to unlocking their full potential. ■