

# Tackling youth joblessness head on

Government together with its social partners has put in place measures to address the social risk of millions of young people unemployed



Analysis

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The signing of the Youth Employment Accord on April 18, 2013 was both historic and significant. It was historic in bringing together for the first time the country's social partners comprising of the government, business, labour and youth formations to commit in resolving the intractable global challenge of youth unemployment, which defies quick-fixes. In 1998, the World Employment Report found that at least 60 million young people were unemployed.

By 2009 this number had increased to 81 million young people. Gugile Nkwinti, the Minister of Rural Development and Land Reform, best captured the sentiments regarding the significance of the Accord when he observed that: "A country that does not look after its youth has no future. The signing of the Youth Employment Accord demonstrates full appreciation of this fact. Empowered youth, particularly those living in rural areas, will invariably help develop their communities by building schools, bridges, roads and erect fences. We must spare no energy in ensuring the successful implementation of this historic Accord."

The Accord affords the youth with meaningful experience in the work environment thus enabling them to "gain life-long skills and the discipline necessary to make it in life". This is a responsibility that the ANC government does not take it lightly. After all, it has committed itself to bringing "a better life for all". There are good reasons that the issue of youth unemployment features prominently in government programmes and consultative engagements.

First, South Africa is a youthful country with more than half of the population under the age of 39. Second, unemployment remains an intractable challenge hovering close to 40% if an expanded definition is used. Third, South African youth unemployment is intolerably high. While 20 million youth that are part of the working population, a staggering 10 million are not economically active with about 3.2 million unemployed. In other words millions of young people are unemployed and have given up in seeking employment.

Unless addressed, youth unemployment poses a risk to the political and social stability of the country. Those given to hyperbole have described it as a ticking bomb.

Evidently, as indicated above this reality is not due to lack of trying. If anything, addressing youth employment has been one singular issue that has preoccupied President Zuma's administration.

Addressing the inaugural presidential Youth Jobs and Skills Indaba in Boksburg on March 2, 2014, President Zuma underscored this point sharply.



**WORK IN PROGRESS:** Through government work creation initiatives such as the Expanded Public Works Programme, more than 1 million job opportunities have been created through with mostly jobless young people are being gainfully employed. PICTURE: VIRTUALLANDSCAPING

He stated: "We take youth development seriously in our country which is why the National Youth Development Agency, reports directly to my office, the Presidency. In April last year, the country reached an important milestone when the Youth Employment Accord was signed in Soweto, by youth leaders, business, labour, government and the community sector. This was a collective resolve to work together to promote youth development in our country. We have taken this Indaba so seriously that already nine Ministers and Deputy Ministers have spoken here."

Following the signing of the accord, the commitment to addressing the scourge came thick and fast with the Industrial Development Corporation setting up a R1bn Youth Enterprise Fund.

The government has as a result embarked on a series of measures ranging from provision of public employment opportunities and support through incentives for job creation in the private sector.

In one sense, the accord compels all signatories to focus on youth. Given the high rate of

unemployment, a conscious decision was taken to focus on labour intensive projects since these are projects that are likely to result in labour absorption.

The government's initiatives should be seen within the broader context of supporting accelerated growth, job creation and promotion of domestic and foreign investment.

Initiatives associated with the accord are beginning to bear fruit. For instance, 1128 956 work opportunities were created through the Expanded Public Works Programme between April 1, 2016 and December 31, 2016. At least 357 722 of these were through the Infrastructure sector, 297 815 from the environmental and culture sector and remaining from the social and non-state sectors.

The Youth Employment Accord and Economic Development project focuses on artisan development, development and support of youth enterprises.

The youth employment project is an ongoing and intended to help achieve the New Growth Path goal of 5 million new jobs by 2020. In this regard, several job creation projects are in the pipeline.

For instance, the Department of Environment intends to scale up the participation of the unemployment youth in the environmental sector. In terms of numbers about 24 500 and 10 500 female and male are target respectively for the financial year 2017-18.

The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry has set aside R447m to support youth owned enterprises. The support includes infrastructure support, training and capacity building and mentorship. One thousand youth people are meant to benefit from this programme.

An additional R25m is earmarked for youth owned enterprises with production inputs and mechanization. About 400 and 1300 female and males are targeted.

Among many exciting projects is the Department of Transport's S'hamba Sonke and Rolling Stock Programme. The programme involves the maintenance of provincial roads.

It will focus on the training of artisans and engineers aimed at creating 74 454 work opportunities for youth. Mega projects on road infrastructure are also in the pipeline.

The Rolling Stock Renewal Programme is expected to create 65 000 direct and indirect jobs over a 20 year period.

For its part, the Department of Communications has identified digital migration as one of the interventions with a potential to alleviate the unemployment situation.

The programme-project involves the installation of government subsidised digital television decoders for the digital migration programme.

Briefly and to ensure that we are on the same page, digital migration refers to system migration from analogue to digital broadcasting. The primary aim of digital migration is to release valuable spectrum which will be used to provide new services such as wireless broadband and other services. Digital television will bring more television channels, more content and allow more choice.

The availability of more television channels will lead to more demand for local content which will translate into growth for local content industry and consequently, industry growth and job creation. The migration will result in better quality sound on both radio and visuals on television. It is our considered view that digital terrestrial television provides an opportunity for South Africa to realise its vision of building a people centred and inclusive information society.

Activities that are related to the project include training of young people at accredited institutions. Placement of successful trainees for task allocation with the Post Office STB distribution and installation programme.

The project is already costed (R700 000) and is targeted for 2780 youth. The digital broadcasting affords South Africans to address the social cohesion and nation building issues. The broadcasters such as SABC, e.tv and MNet will have access to more channels to air diverse programmes to South Africans that meet their information needs. Local content will be a priority.

All the STB will be produced locally and will be protected by this government from foreign intrusion to the market. It will boost the electronic manufacturing industry. Government will ensure the employment that spill over from the infrastructure roll out also benefits young people. The freeing of the spectrum because of digital migration will enable more opportunities for the wireless communication services to ensure faster and more efficiency of communication for the country.

This provides a glimpse of projects that government has embarked on to address the scourge of unemployment. Far from the image that is often bandied around, this is government at work.

A government that is responsive and committed to ensuring that radical economic transformation beyond the realm of rhetoric to reality. The responsibility of expanding opportunities for youth employment is not something the government can outsource.

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