

The Department of Public Works has defended its Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), which is often criticised as being prone to cronyism and corruption and delivering short-term work for beneficiaries, only to leave them in limbo. The department warned that even though it's not a silver bullet, the programme is making gains. The Department of Public Works pointed to the successes of its jobs programme during a graduation ceremony on Thursday for more than 200 participants in the Johannesburg area.

One such beneficiary of the EPWP programme is Elliot Mbatha, who is now a supervisor and motivator. "It was my birthday when I got a call. It was February 2011 and I was working on a river project. I was elated," he said.

"I joined because I was determined to fix my poverty-stricken past. When the opportunity presented itself, I thought, that's me. EPWP is a mini tertiary. I'm a married man today because of the opportunities in EPWP." Mbatha said he managed to avoid a life of crime and reached his goals with the help of the programme.

Stanley Henderson, Deputy Director of the programme, said the project targeted unemployed people from poor communities. "It consists of water, fire, roads maintenance, early childhood development and other initiatives aimed at creating work," he said.

Training and skills development were two key priorities of the programme, which provided tools that could be carried over after the project came to an end.

The programme is completing its fourth phase at the end of March and was planned to continue for the next five years.

"It's about giving participants the opportunity to acquire skills and start their businesses. It's about what you will be doing beyond today," Henderson said.

The country faced high unemployment rates, particularly among the youth, he said. “This is just one intervention by the government. We have to take responsibilities in many of those issues affecting the country,” he said. “There is light at the end of the tunnel as long as we have committed people,” added Henderson.

Explaining the benefits of the programme, Henderson said participants gained skills, allowing some of them to be absorbed into the labour market.

The department said participants would also have a chance to start enterprise developments, cooperatives and many other developments. “There are child support grants in the country. There are also disability grants and old age grants but there is no grant for those willing and capable for work. This programme is meant exactly for that,” Henderson said.

The department also highlighted a number of challenges they encountered in the execution of their duties. This included resistance from government departments who were not willing to prioritise the issue of work and training simultaneously.

Another huge challenge was undue political interference. “Whenever we come across such challenges, we deal with them internally. Our guidelines clearly outline the role of government,” he said.

He encouraged graduates to push on in their mission to improve their lives. “Let’s not stop here, government and its other spheres support you. The programme is there to ensure that all people who are unemployed enter the world of work. I want to emphasise that your receipt of these certificates is not the end of the journey.”

Bongiwe Mculu, from the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, said COGTA participants were receiving their certificates because they had worked very hard. She encouraged them to keep learning. “You have the looks, you have the brains, and now you have your certificates. Use them wisely”.

According to the department, the criteria for admitting participants was contained in the EPWP recruitment guidelines. “We have developed what we call the EPWP recruitment guidelines which also deals with the problem of political interference,” Henderson said.

Only South African nationals are admitted on first preference, but the department's DDG admitted that the department always looked out for essential foreign skilled individuals or groups. "So, one of the criteria is that the applicant should be locally based," Henderson said.

Asked about how many people were committed to the programme, Henderson and speakers before him said dropouts rose to as much as half the class. This means that if 30 people enrolled on the programme, only about 15 would remain by the time the programme came to an end.

Not everyone sang the praises of the programme at the event. A participating dropout told *Daily Maverick* who declined to disclose his identity said the programme worsened poverty because of the government's failure to consult communities sufficiently when introducing the programme. "I only came here because I get to eat," said the participant from Sebokeng in the Vaal. When he joined, he knew that it was would not improve the lives of the poor but would benefit the executors, who happen to be political party leaders and supporters.

"I already knew that I wouldn't benefit. Remember, the programme operates in communities and I have seen it in my own community."

EPWP participant Yvonne Mohami had a more positive story to tell. "In farming we share knowledge. EPWP has a huge impact in the lives of ordinary people. The EPWP brought change to our lives. They contribute a stipend that allows one a little financial freedom. I encourage the youth to come and join. The problem with our youth is that they don't want to dirty their hands," said Mohami.

Mohami was involved in plant farming and she already has her own programme running. Asked what she would do were the programme run into financial difficulty, Mohami admitted that would be a huge challenge. Through her own project, Mohami provides gardening experience to schools such as the Thuto Lore School in Sharpeville, clinics and other departments.

Added Mohami: "Our efforts are aimed at alleviating poverty and providing food for communities."

Added Henderson: “We have to emphasise the value of education. Our future lies in education and training, and the public works programme is meant to achieve exactly that. It’s not something to sneer at.” **DM**