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# SA's jobs crisis: how to slash our 2,500km youth unemployment line

Youth unemployment is a ticking time bomb approaching explosion

By MMUSI MAIMANE

● On Friday South Africa celebrated Youth Day in honour of those brave young people who rose up in the face of injustice to fight for their rightful place at the centre of our country's story. The injustice then was access to education – the foundation on which young people build their future.

Forty-seven years on, the youth of today are saddled with a fresh struggle: joblessness. The number of people who have been unemployed for a year or longer has almost doubled over the past decade – from 3.2-million in 2012 to 6.1-million in 2022. In percentage terms it moved from 68.2% to 78.3%.

At least 4.9-million young people are unemployed. Consider the crisis visually. If every young unemployed South African stood in a single file queue, with an average gap of 50cm between them, the queue would stretch for almost 2,500km. The queue would run from Johannesburg to Mombasa, Kenya – through Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi and Tanzania.

No other country in the world suffers a youth unemployment rate of this startling magnitude. It took me some time to wrap my head around what that means for South Africa. But, more importantly, it reminded me that the greatest challenge South Africa faces is how to slash our exponentially expanding youth unemployment queue.

Youth unemployment is a ticking time bomb approaching explosion. It facilitates the growing inequality between the "haves" and "have nots", while allowing poverty to thrive. Economist Ann Bernstein from the Centre for Development and Enterprise estimates that at least 563 young people have joined the ranks of the unemployed each day since 2008.

A job produces so much more than just an income. It brings order, meaning and value to an otherwise chaotic existence. In the words of former US president Bill Clinton: "I do not believe we can repair the basic fabric of society until people who are willing to work have work. Work organises life. It gives structure and discipline to life."

Clinton's words ring true for us today. Creating work for the 4.9-million young unemployed South Africans is the primary mechanism through which we begin to undo the legacy of our painful past and begin building one South Africa. Every government plan should face the question: "Does this help create work for those without a job?"

The ANC in government is unable to solve our jobs crisis. Despite President Cyril Ramaphosa's infinite talk shops, summits and imbizos, the unemployment rate has continued to rise. We desperately need immediate, bold and radical solutions to slash our youth unemployment queue.

More than 100 years ago, Danish mathematician AK Erlang proposed what is now termed the "queuing theory" – the mathematical study of the congestion and delays of waiting in line. The goal was to find ways to ensure that the time spent waiting in a queue is minimised as much as possible. This increases



Thousands of young job seekers queued outside the Alberton Civic Centre in Gauteng to attend the Youth Job Creation Initiative in 2015. Picture: Sowetan

productivity and customer satisfaction and contributes to the wellbeing of all involved.

It is time we found our own "queuing theory", and Build One South Africa has a plan to radically reduce the youth employment queue. This requires two things: a vibrant private sector in the cities, townships and rural areas that is free to create vigorous economic growth, supported by a public sector that exists not to create jobs for the well-connected but to employ only the best people, whose passion is to deliver excellent services.

Several initiatives will contribute to this, including the immediate creation of township special economic zones. These will be funded from the sale of listed shares owned by the government's Industrial Development Corporation, currently valued at R200bn. The government doesn't need to own shares in big companies. Rather, township economies need to be stimulated and funded to uplift communities, create new jobs and wealth for disadvantaged citizens.

Secondly, a vastly expanded public works programme will be created. Any unemployed person of working age will have the opportunity to enrol in a variety of community service projects near their homes. These will be privately or government run, and range from general clean-ups to community patrols and assistance on infrastructure repair or construction projects. These projects will pay wages at the current public works rate of more than R100 a day and create an opportunity for at least one day of paid work a week. We know this is not a lot, but it is a realistic start to giving millions of people the opportunity and dignity of earning an income to supplement what they receive from government grants.

This initiative would cost the fiscus in the region of R30bn a year and would be expanded to more days, at higher wage levels, as the theft of public money was eradicated and government revenues increased, freeing up more rands for public employment.

In parallel to this initiative, we propose a

complementary private sector-led initiative that can create the opportunity for unemployed people to accept employment from a private employer under similar wage and health and safety conditions as those of the public works programme. If we want the private sector to employ more people, we need to make it easier for them to do so, and we will.

We also propose the introduction of a voluntary national civilian service year that bridges the transition from school to the working world. The year would allow matriculants to enter into work-based training in community health care, basic education, civil service or community policing, gaining valuable work experience while earning a small stipend.

Current empowerment policies must be overhauled since they serve only established elites. It is unacceptable that empowerment creates a few billionaires while millions of black people continue to live in shacks. We will introduce new empowerment policies that focus on helping poor people move into the middle classes by rewarding companies that contribute to the hard quantitative measures of new job creation, employment maintenance, tax payments and export contributions, as well as financing public works schemes, school vouchers, university grants, and low-fee home loans and health insurance.

We will ensure the establishment of a jobs and justice venture capital fund to which businesses will contribute empowerment funding and which will be administered by public finance professionals, not politicians. The fund will ensure real empowerment by supercharging the informal economy through initiatives that bridge the gap between power and potential.

If we begin tomorrow, we could begin to roll back the destructive tide of unemployment and place our country on the path towards inclusive growth, increased prosperity and a shared future.

\* Maimane is leader of Build One South Africa (Bosa)