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Public Employment Programmes and Development of Human Capacity for Disadvantaged Women and Youth: The Case of the Expanded Public Works Programme in S. Africa

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Abstract

Public employment programmes or public works programme are old programmes that have been used during a crisis such as drought, economic downturn, war and off-food insecurity, as well as unemployment, to provide a cushion to the poor and unemployed. After a long battle with unemployment—which is linked to the colonial and apartheid eras, laws, as well as the industrialisation of the country—South Africa introduced the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) in 2004 to provide temporary employment opportunities to the poor and unskilled. This paper used a mixed method approach to analyse the role of the EPWP, a PEP on capacity development for disadvantaged women and youth. The methodology consisted of a survey, semi-structured interviews and literature review. Primary data was collected in two (2)—out of five (5)—districts of the Northern Cape Province, where 128 EPWP participants and 14 EPWP officials from Kimberley townships (Greenpoint, Veregenoerg and Roodepan) and Joe Morolong Local Municipality (Gamothibi and Glenred villages). The analysis of this data involved a two-step approach through which data from surveys was analysed using graphs and tables. Dominant issues identified were followed with semi-structured interviews on a smaller sample size, and EPWP reports were used to substantiate these findings. This data was then presented in thematic form. This paper reveals the complexity of the unemployment challenge, which is beyond the scope of the short-term crisis relief approach of the EPWP, therefore, making two proposals that will change the narrative with which these programmes are conceptualized. Firstly, is the need for a change in the manner in which skills development is implemented by moving away from project-based skills development to a more labour market response approach. Secondly, is the need for public-private partnerships to share the burden of fiscal constraints in skills development to enable labour market transition.

Keywords: *public employment programme, public works programme, employment, unemployment, skills development*

1. Introduction

Public employment programmes (PEPS) refer to short-term programmes[1] that use labour-intensive methods to provide temporary employment and income security to cushion 'vulnerable groups'[2] through food and cash payments (FAO, 2020; ILO, 2021*b*). They are old strategies that started as public works programmes (PWPs) dating back to the 19th century in India (then British India), where a PWP through infrastructure projects was used to respond to successive years of drought during the

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[1] Public Works Programmes (PWPs), employment guarantees, cash-for-work and social protections programmes

[2] Women, youth and people living with disabilities.

1800s (Nath, 2021; Subbaro et al*.,* 2013). These programmes have been popular in both the developed and the developing world, with the USA adopting a PWP to cushion the vulnerable during the Great Depression, which resulted in the employment of between 1.5–2m people (Frances Perkins Centre, 2014). These programmes have gained popularity as short-term crisis relief programmes to provide a temporary cushion to the poor and unemployed, while at the same time developing human resource capacity. Their focus is on unskilled women, youth and people with disabilities. This is evident in PEPs or PWPs in countries such as Argentina having 71% of participants being women, 33% in India, and over 55% target set for women and the youth in South Africa during Phase Three (3) of implementation (Berg et al., 2018; Department of Public Works, 2019; Kotszer, 2018).

These programmes have evolved with time. Long-term challenges such as poverty and unemployment have led some countries to use these programmes on a long-term basis. Countries facing long-term challenges like South Africa, where apartheid-era laws—through the separatist development approach—systematically excluded non-white citizens from access to basic services, employment opportunities and education; thereby creating labour reservoirs for mines and farms, and hence laying a strong foundation to this anomaly (Moon, 2017). In addition, the evolution of the socio-economic landscape has brought about several challenges in society, politics and the economy with high unemployment levels, distribution of the poor, and widening equality gaps dominating policy discussions. This has been complemented by structural changes in the economy that have rendered some skills redundant; leaving the country with unemployment levels based on age, location (rural, urban, township or farms), and gender (Faith et al., 2020; McCord & Bhorat, 2003).

Unemployment and poverty has been dominating in women and youth. The debate around unemployment of women and youth has gained traction in both policy and academic spheres. In the case of young people, it is attributed to the lack of prerequisite skills and qualifications by rural youth, which is said to result from the failure of technical and vocational training programmes to equip youth with skills that are relevant to the labour market (Faith et al*.,* 2020). It is also said to be worsened by population growth, climate change, urbanization and technological change (Gugelev, 2018). South Africa had already an existing problem of unemployment created by uneven education system, which was then exacerbated by the restructuring of the economy, thus leaving the country in a much dire situation. The country needs to embrace digital technology where new skills have emerged that further complicate the country's unemployment challenge (Sibanda, 2021).

The spread of the country's unemployment is disproportionate within different population groups, with women and the youth in the rural areas as well as townships bearing the brunt of the challenge. The unemployment of women was estimated at 35.4% compared 30.4% for men in Quarter Four of 2022; and the youth at 46.5% compared to 32.9% at the national level during Quarter One of

2023 (Statistics South Africa, 2022, 2023). This defeats the call for the emancipation of these groupings in the local and international sphere, where '*decent work'* emphasizes their employment (ILO, 2017; UN Women, 1995). Pressed by rising unemployment levels, deep inequality and poverty, the government of South Africa introduced the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) in 2004, a PEP aiming to provide a temporary relief to the poor or unemployed; and at the same time to provide skills development to the unskilled or semi-skilled (*Mail and Guardian*, 2004). This programme is implemented through a phased-approach, with each phase lasting for a period of five years. Each phase has its own target of employment opportunities. For instance, the target job opportunities for Phase One (2004–2009) was 1m; 4m for Phase Two (2010–2014), and 6m for Phase Three (3) (2015–2019) (Sibanda, 2021).

There is a lot of literature on the analysis of PEPs and the EPWP, but the concentration has been on the conceptualization of these programmes (Desai et al., 2015). The role of these programmes on skills development—especially for disadvantaged women and youth who are their main main target—is not explored. This is despite a shift in the use from short-term crises to long-term structural challenges on issues such as poverty, unemployment and food insecurity (Gehrke & Hartwig, 2015). This means the assessment of the role of these programmes should go beyond short-term employment-creation to be inclusive of their contribution to labour market transition of women and youth living in the rural areas, as well as townships, through skills development.

Women and youth—who are the most affected by unemployment due to their lack of skills—are the main targets of PEPs and the EPWP. It is for this reasons that this paper seeks to explore how the EPWP is responding to the skills needs of these groupings given that they are the main target of the programme. In this paper, we first discuss how PEPs have been conceptualized, linking it to the design of South Africa's EPWP as a strategy to cushion women and youth from structural unemployment. The paper then sets out the methodology followed in the collection of data. This is then followed by a discussion of the findings, with the last section being a conclusion of the study.

2. Literature

Literature reviewed in this paper is taken from local and international studies on PEPs or PWPs. These terms tends to be used as synonyms in certain platforms, but the latter is actually a part of the former; and is defined as a programme that makes use of government infrastructure projects to create temporary jobs (ILO, 2021*b*; Subbaro et al., 2013). PEPs, on the hand, are massive government programmes that include PWPs, short-term emergency programmes and employment guarantees, which create temporary employment or provide social protection through infrastructure, community and environmental services projects (ILO, 2021*b*; Phillip, 2013). These programmes are not another form of government or international aid: beneficiaries are paid for work done, and at times 'food parcels'

(food for work programmes) are used as a form of payment (Dejardin, 1996; ILO, 2012). PEPs are internationally prised programmes that draw their main strength from partnerships between governments of implementing countries with institutions such as the World Bank, International Labour Organisation (ILO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), DANIDA Fellowship Centre, the World Food Programme, and others that provide financial as well as technical support (Dejardin, 1996).

These programmes have been applauded for providing a temporary relief to the poor and unemployed through short-term job opportunities because they are able to draw large numbers of people to employment opportunities. For example, the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) of Ethiopia led to the employment of 7m people in 2008; the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act of 2005 in India led to 53m people to be employed in 2010; while the South Africa's EPWP caused the employment of 5m people in 2019 (Sibanda, 2021).

2.1 Public Employment Programmes (PEPs)

PEPs continue to be convenient strategies widely used to cushion vulnerable groups during crises such as drought, war, economic downturn and others. They are short-term programmes that are used to rebuild infrastructure after a disaster, or a temporary measure during an economic downturn; but countries like South Africa, Ethiopia, India and others have been innovative by using them on long-term crises such as poverty, structural unemployment and food insecurity (del Ninno et al., 2009; Phillip, 2013). These programmes deviate from the norm through their scope and guiding principles. Their principles include non-adherence to minimum wage, use of food as a form of payment in some instances, targeting certain groups, and the use of community assets or services to create mass employment (Dejardin, 1996; ILO, 2021*b*). They are expected to provide a cushion to the poor or unemployed, provide food security, improve living standards, bring economic sanity, and build or maintain public assets (ISPA, 2017; Meth, 2011).

Such programmes are popular policy instruments adopted by governments in Latin America, Asia, Europe and Africa during crises (Gehrke & Hartwig, 2015). The most notable examples from around the world are those of PWPs. These have been used in the African continent as a response to short-term challenges such as drought in countries like Botswana and Zimbabwe (between 1980 and 1990) (Dejardin, 1996; Von Braun et al., 1992). Despite being conceptualized as short-term crisis relief programmes, they have been used on long-term challenges such as on poverty, and rural and youth unemployment in countries like Burundi (1979), Rwanda (1980), Sierra Leone (2009); and Senegal, Mauritania and Mali in the 1960s (del Nino et al., 2009; Dejardin, 1996; Subbarao et al., 2012; Rosas & Sabarwal, 2016). Their prevalence extends beyond the African continent to countries such as Bangladesh, India, El Salvador, Argentina, East Germany and the USA (Alderman, 2014; del Ninno et al., 2009; Gehrke & Hartwig, 2015; Kostzer, 2008; Kraus et al., 2000, USA Work Program, 1937).

The benefits realised by implementing countries include economic growth, improvement in the social well-being of recipients, saving on unemployment insurance, and the creation of assets (Sibanda, 2021). For instance, Argentina benefited from 2.53% growth in the economy due to the Jefes ya Jefas Descupados of 2002; Ethiopia saw an increase in temporary household income due to the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) of 2005; while the USA managed to create public assets such roads, railways and bridges through the Works Program of 1935 (ISPA, 2017; Kostzer, 2008; Kraus et al., 1998; USA Program, 1937). In addition, these programmes in Bangladesh and Argentina incorporated skills development in their designs; with beneficiaries being expected to gain skills in construction, firefighting, motor mechanics, baking, and others (del Ninno et al., 2009; Tanzarn & Gutierezz, 2015). However, the accumulation of these skills has not been quantified or seen through labour market transition because concentration has mainly been on the creation of temporary jobs and public assets.

On the other hand, these programmes have been criticised for creating assets that are abandoned by the intended recipients because they are not needed. This was the case in Rwanda, Madagascar and Uganda where there were failures to transfer ownership or maintenance rights, thus creating assets that were not accessed by the intended beneficiaries (Gehrke & Hartwig, 2015; Mishra, 2011; Tanzarn & Gutierezz, 2015). As a result these programmes fail to improve the lives of the poor and unemployed through asset accumulation that can be used as a source of long-term income or accumulation of skills through maintenance. In countries like East Germany, India and Ethiopia, these programmes were criticised for the lack of prioritisation of the needs of the vulnerable groups, thus depriving them an opportunity to acquire skills they would use for self-employment or join the labour market (Gehrke & Hartwig, 2015). This is despite the link of unemployment of these groups to the lack of skills.

2.2 The Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP)

Under the custodian of the National Department of Public Works and Infrastructure, the EPWP was officially launched in 2004, but its origin can be traced to 1994. It was first introduced as a PWP known as the Community Based Public Works Programme (CBPWP) through a presidential-led project funded through a grant amounting to R250m with an aim to create jobs, reduce poverty, develop skills, promote public-private partnerships and create public assets (Department of Public Works, 1997). Similar to other PWPs from around the world, the CBPWP made use of labour-intensive methods to build and maintain community infrastructure, while creating short-term employment to cushion the poor and unskilled (Department of Public Works, 1997, 2009; SARPN, 2003). As a new programme, the CBPWP had various challenges that included unreliable information, poor monitoring, too short projects, lack of skills development, very low wages, poor working conditions and failure to address the needs of the designated groups (women, youth and the disabled) (Department of Public Works, 1997).

The government of South Africa, through the Growth and Development Summit in 2003, adopted the expansion of a PWP to a PEP that was then launched in Limpopo in 2004 as the EPWP (Department of Public Works, 1997; *Mail & Guardian*, 2004; SARPN, 2003). In the summit it was resolved that the country needed a massive programme to provide a cushion to the poor, create temporary employment, develop skills, and strengthen livelihoods (SARPN, 2003). In its introduction, the EPWP was meant to assist the country to get rid of the 'apartheid-era labour reservoirs' (Moon, 2017) that was built for the farms and mines.

Following a phased approach of five-yearly phases, the EPWP is funded by the South African government through the Division of Revenue Act (DoRA) of 1998. Its employment targets grew over the phases from 1m jobs in Phase One to about 6m job opportunities[3] in its Phase Three of implementation (National Treasury, 1998; Department of Public Works, 2009, 2014; Department of Public Works and Infrastructure, 2019*a*). This programme does not adhere to the national minimum wage but has its own EPWP minimum wage: it follows the prescripts of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act of 1997, and the Code of Good Practice (Department of Public Works, 2009, 2014; South African Cities Network, 2016). It is also aligned to the National Development Plan (NDP);[4] women and youth targets were set at 55% in Phase Three, and by so doing it aligned with global commitments to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5 [gender equality] and 8 [decent work and economic growth]) (Department of Public Works and Infrastructure, 2019*a*; ILO, 2017). The programme has contributed to the creation and maintenance of public assets that include roads, storm water drainages, dams, and others (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2019).

4. Methodology

This paper followed the methodology outlined in a study by Sibanda and Thebe (2022) that looked at the design or model of the EPWP in relation to the needs of the unskilled and unemployed in the country. This study concluded that the EPWP is designed as a poverty trap, and needed to redesign to reduce the impact of the country's unemployment and poverty challenges. This paper is based on a mixed method approach involving a survey, semi-structured interviews and a document review. Primary data was collected in two (2) out of the five (5) districts of the Northern Cape Province.

This data was supplemented by literature on EPWP from 2004 to 2019. The literature reviewed above revealed that the EPWP is a phased programme that started in 2004, and each phase has a duration of five (5) years. This study analysed 15 years of the existence of the EPWP.

[3] The programme's employment creation and social protection roles were incorporated in Chapters 3 and 11, respectively of this strategic government document (National Planning Commission, 2012).

[4] "Chapter 11 of the NDP states that the vast majority of the unemployed currently have no access to social protection and that EPWP as a Public Employment Programme (PEP) can play an important part in reducing this gap, especially if it can increase its safety net further" (Department of Public Works, 2013:2).

4.1 Primary Data Collection Methods

Primary data collection consisted of two methods: surveys and semi-structured interviews. The survey involved 128 EPWP participants from Kimberley townships (Greenpoint, Veregenoerg and Roodepan), and Joe Morolong Local Municipality (Gamothibi and Glenred Villages). These areas were chosen because data was collected in 2020, but the study was concentrating on Phases One to Three that ended in 2019, and these areas still had Phase Three (3) projects that were still running. They also had a wide variety of projects and a large numbers of EPWP participants. The sample included 23 former EPWP participants who were traced to the various locations that they had moved into to collect data on how they had integrated in the labour market.

The study also collected data from 14 EPWP persons who consisted of government officials in the Northern Cape and Gauteng (EPWP Head Office) Provinces. Such a composition was critical in the context of the present study because the EPWP is a government programme that cuts across all spheres, and its implementation and monitoring is done by government officials. Therefore, these officials were in a position to affirm, reject or provide new information to supplement what was documented in the EPWP reports and EPWP participants' views. They could also provide information that they found difficult to communicate through formal channels. Key issues that came out in the structured interviews were then followed up with semi-structured interviews with key informants. Data were collected from the same participants but on a reduced sample, which consisted of active or former EPWP participants and EPWP officials.

4.2 Secondary Data Collection Methods

As mentioned earlier, this study covered three phases of the EPWP from 2004 to 2019. Secondary data was collected from studies on EPWP employment and EPWP reports that fall within this period.

4.3 Analysis and Presentation of Findings

The EPWP and South Africa's unemployment is very complex, hence the reason for a three-tier data collection process. The data collected from structured interviews was analysed, coded and presented using tables and figures. These findings were combined with data from semi-structured interviews and secondary data sources, and then presented in a thematic form. This paper makes use of pseudonyms in the presentation of its findings to protect the identity of the study respondents.

4.4 Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted in the Northern Cape Province, the smallest province in the country in terms of population size and the number of EPWP projects implemented. However, this limitation was managed by the inclusion of literature in the form of EPWP reports, studies and other documents on EPWP to supplement primary data. Literature on skills development by PEPs or PWPs is also very limited: this is because focus has mainly been on the creation of temporary

jobs, which is mainly suitable in the case of short-term crisis relief, thus neglecting the innovation by countries of use of these programmes on long-term challenges. Thus, this study aims to contribute to the literature through an analysis of the role of the EPWP on skills development.

5. Results and Discussions

The previous section discussed the methodology followed in the collection and analysis of data, in which a mixed approach methodology was followed. This section presents the findings of the study. Discussions in this paper emphasise that South Africa's unemployment challenge is supply-driven: i.e., the labour force in the country cannot meet the needs of the labour market. This makes skills development critical if the country is to win the fight against unemployment. Country strategies like the EPWP emphasise the need to provide skills development for the unskilled or semi-skilled. Given the high unemployment levels of women and youth, this paper seeks to evaluate the role of the EPWP in skills development for these groupings.

Using the methodology described above, the paper presents seven findings relating to the role of EPWP in skills development as follows. Firstly, the EPWP targets people with little or no skills, which is as per the programme's objective. The programme is drawing its participants from a pool of the poor, unskilled or semi-skilled; and interested parties would want to know what happens to those people. The second verdict is that, a wide variety of skills development programmes are offered by the EPWP, giving its beneficiaries a wide range of courses to choose from. The third study finding is that skills development is expensive and unaffordable. This leads to the fourth outcome: skills development is limited due to financial constraints. Fifth, and arising from this, despite the variety of courses identified in the second finding, the fact that skills development is expensive and financial resources are limited results into the programme offering incomplete qualifications, which is done in an unsystematic manner. The sixth finding is that there is high rate of drop-outs/failures in EPWP skills development. The last finding is that there are high chances of labour market integration in cases where EPWP participants gains full qualification, hence the need to address the shortcomings of the programme to enhance skills development. Below, we discuss these findings as themes in more detail.

The first theme says that the EPWP targets people with little or no skills. This was confirmed by one of the EPWP officials who participated in the interviews, who said:

> … *we draw unskilled and poor people from the communities. We get some of the names from the indigent lists of the municipalities* (Mr. Nzama, Interview, Kimberley, 3 October 2020).

The profiles of the EPWP participants who took part in the surveys further confirmed this; with 67% (86 out of 128) participants indicating that they are semi-skilled, and 33% (42) being unskilled, as shown in Figure 1.

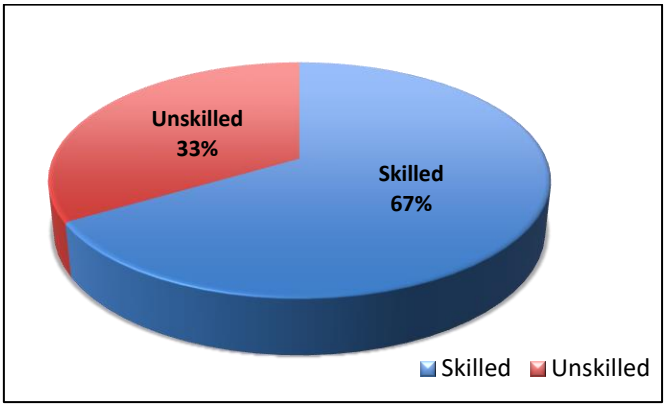

Figure 1: Skills Levels in the EPWP

However, participants who indicated that they were skilled were referring to elementary skills such as gardening, knitting, domestic work, cleaning, recycling, waste picking, computer operation, till operation, home-based care and waitressing. The programme is expected to employ the unskilled and semi-skilled people: this finding illustrates that it is fulfilling this objective. The skills identified by the 67% participants are elementary that need to be improved; and 33% had no skills at all; therefore needed skills development. This further emphasises the need to skill or re-skill people. This data highlights the importance of supply-side policy response through skills development (McCord & Bhorat, 2003). In its launch, the programme emphasised the need to build the country's human capital as one of its aims.

In the emphasis on skills development, there are certain sectors that need more skills than others. The country has a list of skills from certain sectors that are known as hard-to-fill skills. The EPWP is participating in a number of economic sectors, and this was identified through the second theme, which says there is a wide variety of skills development programmes offered in the EPWP. These programmes consist of accredited training. Accredited training is rolled out across the programme, and is linked to the economic sectors.[5] As shown in Figure 2, the programme has skilled people in qualifications from 10 different employment sectors. These include providers of soft skills such as the Local Government Sector Education and Training Authority (LGSETA), Services Sector Education and Training Authority (Services SETA), Health and Welfare Sector Education and Training Authority (HWSETA), Culture, Art, Tourism, Hospitality and Sport Sector Education and Training Authority (CATHSSETA), Safety and Security Sector Education and Training Authority (SASSETA), and Media, Information and Communication Technologies Sector Education and Training Authority (MICT SETA).

[5]Sector training was in skills that included welding, electricity, boiler making, motor mechanics, plant production, broadcast engineering, general forestry, culture site guide, construction road works, Thogomelo Psychosocial Support Community Caregivers, building and civil patrol security, landscaping, pharmacist assistants, cook convenience, community house building and others (EPWPRS, 2018).

Other skills identified are technical skills provided by the Construction Education and Training Authority (CETA), Agriculture Sector Education and Training Authority (AgriSETA), Fibre Procession and Manufacturing Sector Education and Training Authority (FP&MSETA), and Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services Education and Training Authority (MerSETA). All these sectors offer short skills programmes (incomplete qualifications to perform a certain task), or full qualification in the form of a learnership or artisan programmes.

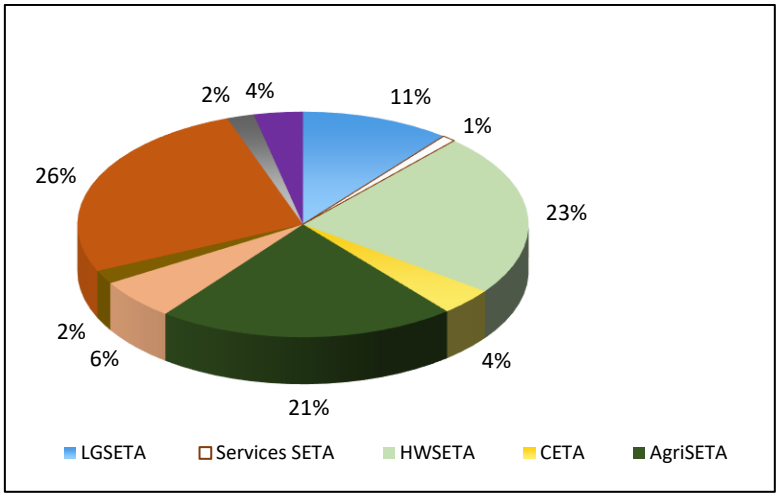

Figure 2: EPWP Skills Development per Employment Sector
Source: EPWPRS, 2018

As shown in Figure 2, these sectors trained more people at 23% for HWSETA qualifications, 21% for AgriSETA, 26% for CATHSSETA; while Services SETA and SASETA contributed the least at 1% and 2%, respectively. However, despite the variety in the skills provided, one would expect skills from MICTSETA (information and technology skills), CETA (construction), MerSETA (engineering skills) and AgriSETA (agriculture training courses) to be very popular on the programme because of the need of these skills in the country. In the case of MICTSETA, the shift towards digitalisation makes this sector very critical and with agriculture courses—the food insecurity challenge in the country and the availability of vast land—highlights the need for skills in this sector. Positions such as machinist, site agents, project managers, mixed crop and livestock farm workers and others are said to be hard to fill (Sibanda, 2021). This emphasises the need for the prioritisation of certain sectors.

Skills development is often discussed widely and so are the costs associated with it. The third theme identified by this paper is that skills development is expensive and unaffordable. Affordability of skills development is critical for marginalised groups such as unemployed youth and women. The study unveiled that notwithstanding the poverty-related challenges faced by women and youth, skills development is

too expensive and unaffordable. Despite the need for skills development emphasised in theme one, and the variety of economic sectors displayed in theme two, the programme finds skills development too costly. As a result the programme finds it difficult to provide full qualifications such as learnerships and artisan development. This was confirmed by one EPWP official:

> *Artisan development is very expensive; and with limited resources, EPWP is making a lot of compromises. For example, EPWP for artisan wages we pay about R 3 000, which is far lower than what the industry requires; while private employers—for example mines—pay their artisans between R13 000 and R 30 000 per month…. because we cannot afford it* (Mrs. Mngoma, Interview, Pretoria, 12 October 2020).

The programme resorts to paying participants less than the regulated wages to be able to provide the training. Artisan development is seen as one of the interventions to take people out of structural unemployment, and it is emphasized in the country. The Department of Higher Education and Training declared 2014–2024 a decade of artisan development; and the country is expected to skill 30,000 artisans per annum by 2024 (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2014). Although the much-needed skills development is unaffordable both to the government and to the people that need the skills, but training is necessary if the country is to successfully get rid of structural unemployment, especially among women and young people.

The success and effectiveness of many skills development programmes depends on the availability of various forms of support from various stakeholders. This paper noted that there is limited skills development due to financial constraints. The programme receives funding for skills development from the Department of Higher Education and Training through the National Skills Fund (NSF). This funding is very minimal; with less than 1% of the envisaged EPWP participants receiving training in a phase. This is despite the emphasis of skills development by the programme, with which participants are expected to use the acquired skills to join the active labour market (*Mail* and *Guardian*, 2019). This was supported by one of the EPWP officials who participated in the surveys:

> *… there is little or no training that we provide …we have never budgeted for it because resources are not sufficient. This forces us to concentrate on the implementation of projects, which takes priority over everything else* (Mrs. Tims, Interview, Kuruman, 12 October 2020).

Some women on the programme have expressed their displeasure with the limited skills development opportunities. For example, Zinhle—a 47-year-old woman and mother of two from Greenpoint Township, who has been working on a street cleaning project since 2016—said she and 20 other people in her group have been waiting for a training that was promised to them three (3) years ago. She said that they were promised training in National Certificate in Environmental Practice Level 3, but each year when they enquired about it they were told it will probably come in the coming year. This was confirmed by an EPWP official who said her participants have been waiting for training for over two (2) years:

> *My participants have been waiting for training since 2018 … they may end up exiting before receiving any training…This is embarrassing … l keep on promising them (EPWP participants), but the Department of Public Works* [i.e., the National Department of Public Works and Infrastructure] *does not deliver…Each year there is a story about training applications being stuck in Pretoria* (Mrs. Bhala, Interview, Kimberley, 03 October 2020).

As the waiting is frustrating, Zinhle was thinking that she will exit the programme before she got the training. Thus, EPWP participants wait for a long time to get training, and some never get to receive the training that is promised to them due to the lack of funds. This was reiterated by another EPWP participant:

> *… things are not going well for us young people… we look like we are 'deurmekaar'* [disorganized] *and yet we are trying very hard, but things are just not working out for us. I was personally hoping l would get a skill in EPWP and have always dreamt of becoming a traffic officer, but it does not look like it is ever going to happen* (Mpho, Interview, Kimberley, 24 October 2020).

Young people emphasize their need for skills. They believe the skills are required to enhance their chances of accessing employment by people that acquire them, or are a key to entrepreneurship opportunities. This was emphasized by Itepeng, a 28-year-old male from Roodepan Township in Kimberley, an EPWP participant who took part in the interviews. His story paints a gloomy picture of the future of unskilled youth in townships. Itepeng dropped out of school in grade eight (8) due to substance abuse, and was now living a partly clean life after undergoing drug rehabilitation. He emphasized his need for skills, saying:

> *I want to start my own business as an electrician but l need a certificate for it, which l cannot afford to do on my own. I want to employ other young people in my location. I have been searching for a job for the past five (5) years with no luck… Many young people are 'stout'* [naughty]; *here they are using 'tik'* [methamphetamine] *and 'gafifi'* [rock cocaine]. *Some are involved in petty crimes and are tired of this kind of life* (Itepeng, Interview, Kimberley, 25 September 2020).

Itepeng has crossed paths with the police, or Operation Wanya Tsotsi (Kimberley civilian crime busters) because of his mischievous behaviours, and does not like this kind of life. He said he joined the EPWP to get away from crime; and to do so he was hoping to get training in construction trade. Itepeng's life is an example of the effects of frustrations resulting from psychological effects of unemployment on human beings, which often lead to social problems (Cloete, 2015). EPWP participants are frustrated by the lack of skills development within the programme. As a result, due to the lack of skills development, frustration has become a standing item on the list of grievances during protests. Thus, participants understand of their lack of skills, and the need for skills to acquire decent employment; and consequently move from casual work to full-time employment (Ground Up, 2014). However, due to limited funding, the programme cannot provide skills development to all participants, hence the emphasis on public-private partnerships to bring more resources to the programme (DPWI, 2019*b*; SACN, 2016).

The emphasis on skills development has created a lot of expectations by both politicians and the unskilled, but the extent to which the development of these skills

is taken by the programme is not coming out clearly in discussions, especially in relation to the needs of the labour market. Due to the costs involved, skills development in EPWP concentrates on incomplete qualifications, and is not systematic. To respond to pressure from stakeholders, the programme resorts to short skills development or incomplete qualifications, mainly to allow people to perform certain tasks in projects. As shown in Figure 3, about 89% of the 2018–2023 budget, which was based on agreement with the Department of Higher Education and Training, was allocated to short skills programmes; and the remainder was split between learnerships and artisan programmes.

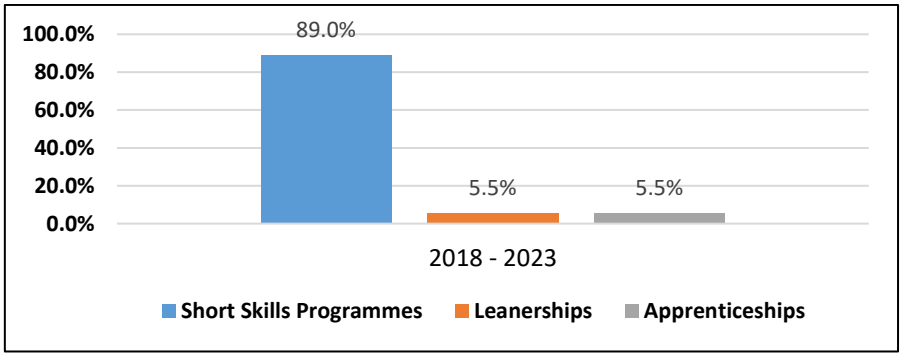

Figure 3: Allocation of EPWP Training Budget per Qualification

Source: EPWPRS, 2018

The data from the surveys confirmed this with 46.1% of the respondents indicating that they had gone through unaccredited training in the form of a few hours' or days' workshops, 50.8% said that they had received a short skills programme training, and 3.1% said they have been able to attend a learnership. This means the majority of participants are afforded an opportunity to attend a short skills programme or workshop, inspite of the fact that most people have no skills, or are not in possession of elementary skills. In addition, these are women and youth from townships, as well as villages, who are mostly affected by unemployment. Therefore, the programme is not providing the much needed solution to the shortage of skills of these groups. One EPWP official who participated in the interviews affirmed this view by stating:

> *We spend more resources on short skills programmes because full qualifications are expensive, so we train people to be able to perform their duties as required by the project* (Mrs. Mngoma, Interview, Pretoria, 12 October 2020).

Despite being minimal, skills development also does not assist the intended recipients to acquire qualifications specifically tailored for the labour market. In addition, skills development is done in a haphazard manner. Figure 4 shows examples of skills acquired by EPWP participants, in which they received a few credits in more than one unrelated qualifications.

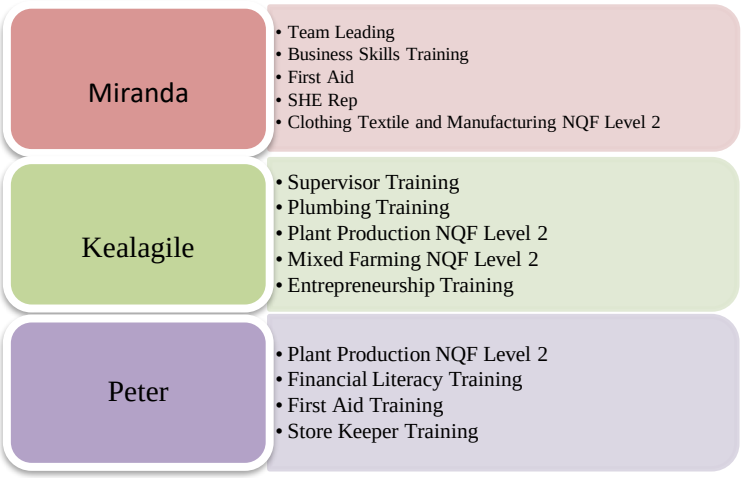

Figure 4: Skills Development in EPWP

As shown in Figure 4, Miranda and Kealagile have attended training for five qualifications—or part qualifications—since they started working in the EPWP in 2012. These courses are not related. For instance, in the case of Miranda, she has done First Aid (unaccredited), Clothing and Textile manufacturing (accredited), SHE Rep (unaccredited), Team Leader (unaccredited) and Business Skills (accredited). Three (3) out of five (5) of these courses are unaccredited, which means they are workshops. Clothing Textile and Manufacturing qualification and Business Skills courses can assist her become an entrepreneur. Miranda, who is 31 years old, aspires to become a Grade R teacher. She is not interested in starting a business or working as a seamstress. She said she attended the Clothing and Textile Manufacturing course because other people in her project had applied for it. In addition to being an incomplete qualification, this course is not useful to her; so it was just a waste of her time and resources. One of the EPWP officials who took part in the interviews was alos critical of this, saying:

> … *if we are to do an impact assessment on short skills development, we will realize that it is just a wasteful expenditure. It does not add any value to people's lives* (Mrs. Mngoma, Interview, Pretoria, 12 October 2020).

Peter (in Figure 3) is also in the same predicament as Miranda: with three (3) part qualifications that are incomplete and not aligned with his career ambitions. This is the case with many other EPWP participants who are still hoping to find employment outside the programme.

Active participation and commitment of participants to training is critical for successfully meeting the training objectives at any level of education. However, this is not the case with the EPWP because findings from this study show that there is a high drop-out or failure rate of the training beneficiaries. The study revealed that, in most cases, EPWP participants fail to cope with the demands of skills

development programmes and end up dropping out or failing to complete the qualification. Some EPWP officials expressed their frustration on this trend; with one official who participated in the interviews expressing this by saying:

> W*e once had a skills development programme where 66% of the learners dropped out. This was a waste of resources given that this was a short skills programme. We could have taken a few people on a full qualification* (Mr. Modise, Interview, Pretoria, 3 October 2020).

In this case, people dropped out of a short skills programme, which in most cases was project-based. The official thinks maybe it could have been better if they had taken a few people and trained them on a full qualification. However, this also happens in the case of full qualifications, with one artisan programme which once recruited 100 participants in 2011 in the Northern Cape that saw only 48% of the trainees qualifying as artisans, while 52% failed to qualify. One would expect that if people are given an opportunity to undergo training they would make an effort to get the qualification. Some EPWP officials think some young people within the programme lack skills to cope with the demands of certain qualifications. One EPWP official who took part in the interviews said:

> *Young people lack life skills that will enable them endure a training programme to the end… when they feel a bit of pressure on one programme, they hop onto the next learnership or move to a better-paying learnership. In the end, there is no qualification achieved* (Mr. Nzama, Interview Kimberley, 3 October 2020).

As the above extract narrates, it has become a norm that EPWP participants leave one qualification for another in search of better wages. In this case, skills development was not a priority in the first place: people joined the training just to earn a learnership stipend. They are also said to be lacking commitment to skills development: even when they get incomplete qualifications, they sometimes lose the certificates, as said by one official:

> *Some EPWP participants lose certificates or use the certificates received from skills development -- especially for short skills programmes—to make fire* (Mrs. Nagel, Interview, Kimberley, 3 October 2020).

Also, some officials feel that the government is not doing enough in providing support to the EPWP participants during training, as attested by one EPWP official:

> *The main challenge with training is that some learners fail to complete their courses because of the failure to cope with the chosen qualification; and others realize after enrolment that they have chosen a course that they are not interested in. Work placement for the practical component of training is a problem because some learners fail to get employers where they can do practicals due to geographical locations as some may be from rural areas or small towns* (Mrs. Mngoma, Interview, Pretoria, 12 October 2020).

The few that are getting an opportunity to enrol for training should be able to use it fully to their advantage. This trend is worrying given the scarcity of resources and the levels of structural unemployment in the country.

When one receives a certificate or go through some form of training, the normal expectation is that s/he will be absorbed by the labour market. The discussions in the themes above regarding the need and emphasis on the development of skills further elaborates on the matter. Data collected in this study has proven that there are high chances of labour market integration in cases where EPWP participants gain full qualifications, and the skills are in line with the needs of the labour market. One official who emphasized the importance of training on relevant qualifications said:

> *In 2011, through the National Youth Service sub-programme, the EPWP trained 100 young people together with the NECSA[6] as a host employer for Northern Cape youth, where funds were allocated for skills development. The programme developed skills in the following trades: boiler making (20), electricians (20), mechanical fitter (20), tuner (20), and welding (20) from different districts. Of these, 67 were males and 33 were females* (Mr. Nzama, Interview, Kimberley, 03 October 2020).

This study managed to trace 23 of these former EPWP participants, some of whom have relocated to other provinces such as the Western Cape, Mpumalanga and Gauteng. Out of the 23 who responded, 11(47%) were employed in both private sector and public parastatals in the Western Cape, Northern Cape, Mpumalanga and Gauteng Provinces; two (2) persons said to have started their own businesses; three (3) said they did not complete their qualifications and were unemployed; and 7(30%) said they were qualified but were still looking for permanent jobs, and were currently relying on short-term contracts.

The evidence above shows that the outcomes of EPWP programme remain ambiguous despite the public view that the programme is the next best alternative for the unemployed (Hlatshwayo, 2017; Meth, 2011). It is criticised for the lack of evidence of long-term impact on reducing poverty and unemployment. This means, the programme has not been adopted as one of the labour market policies (Phillip, 2013). Wage transfers are only providing a temporary consumption relief, and there is little success in entrepreneurship (Dladla & Mutambara, 2018; Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2019; Phillip, 2013). Thus, labour market transition, or transition to permanent income through self-employment is not visible.

6. Conclusion

This paper focused on the contribution of EPWP, a PEP to skills development for women and youth living in South African rural areas, as well as townships. It started by outlining the history of PEPs—or PWPs—and then presented arguments behind the persistence of structural unemployment among women and the youth in South Africa as a challenge that the government responded to through a PEP. It then went on to analyse the role played by PEPs (PWPs) in general, and then the EPWP. In the foregoing, we have discussed how the EPWP responded to skills development needs in the country as a supply side policy intervention. Here, we draw the conclusion that, despite the emphasis of skills development, the model of PEPs has not changed to accommodate the changing needs of the implementing

[6] South African Nuclear Energy Corporation

countries, that is, they remain short-term crisis relief programmes. Their short-term crisis relief design has not changed to embrace the nature of long-term challenges such as poverty, unemployment and food insecurity; thus reducing them to semi-permanent programmes.

Though addressing a long-term challenge, the EPWP still bears the hallmarks of a short-term crisis relief programme. This leaves its programmes with less room to tackle long-term socio-economic challenges because they are not incorporated in its design. It is due to these factors that this study concludes that the programme is failing to contribute to skills development in the qualities and quantities required by the country. The poorly understood reality through the short-term crisis relief approach by the programme continues to deprive the country of making inroads in the labour market absorption of unskilled or semi-skilled women and youth. The belief that the programme is a means to enable labour market transition seems to be inaccurate (South African Cities Network, 2016). We realise that there are government constraints to the programme, which include limited financial resources, objectives to achieve targets through short skills development, and implementation that is entangled in red-tape or is undermined by implementing officials. However, we argue that the government needs to find a way to balance the needs of the unskilled masses with those of employers. The apartheid-era created labour reservoirs have not been rid of, and they are building up.

It clear from the foregoing that the EPWP has turned into another trap where unskilled and semi-skilled women and youth find it difficult to exit from, and into full-time employment because the environment does not create such opportunities. This implies that, firstly, the programme needs to be redesigned to make meaningful contribution to skills development. This means skills development needs to be embedded in all its sub-programmes. Secondly, there is a need for public-private partnerships to allow for co-funding of skills development initiatives since the government on its own cannot afford to provide enough resources for the task of skills development. Thirdly, there is a need for programmes such as pyscho-social support and career counselling to prepare participants for skills development opportunities that are aligned to their career goals: this will enable able them to choose the right trainings, and also complete what they start. Lastly, there is a need for cooperation and more collaboration across all spheres of government so that officials work towards the achievement of the same goal. The current fragmented support is affecting the potential of the programme. Future studies can explore the manner in which the EPWP, or PEPs in general, need to incorporate skills development in their designs that will also allow for the expansion of partnerships to include the private sector.

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