

Gundo Lashu (Our Victory): Labour intensive public roads programmes in South Africa

With more than 25 per cent of jobless people, the Republic of South Africa is faced with rampant unemployment – coupled with high levels of poverty and a lack of skills. As part of the South African Government's strategy to provide poverty and income relief through temporary work, the labour intensive Expanded Public Works Programme was introduced in 2004. It received technical support from the ILO, which is also assisting the Government with the development and formulation of policy. South African journalist Eleanor Momberg reports from Johannesburg.

12/1/2010

FTR/PublicRoadProgrammeinSouthAfrica

Travelling in the rural areas and smaller towns of Limpopo Province in the north of South Africa there is evidence of communities benefiting from the work of thousands of people who have gained from labour-intensive public works programmes.

Approved by the Cabinet in November 2003 and launched in 2004, the South African Government's Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) actively contributed to this through the promotion of economic growth and sustainable development, creating temporary work opportunities for the unemployed, particularly the unskilled.

The goal of the first phase of the EPWP, which combined work opportunities with training and skills development, was to help alleviate unemployment by creating at least one million work opportunities by 2009, of which at least 40 per cent of beneficiaries would be women, 30 per cent youth and 2 per cent people with disabilities. That goal was reached in 2008, with 1.6 million work opportunities created by the end of phase 1 of the project in 2009.

A Growth and Development Summit took place that year resulting in the allocation of R100 billion for the creation of employment-intensive public works projects. While the South African programme is unique in that it is now wholly government-funded and thus not reliant on the generosity of donors, it was built on the lessons learnt from ILO-assisted programmes such as the successful Gundo Lashu (Our Victory) labour-intensive provincial roads programme implemented in Limpopo Province by the Limpopo Roads Agency in 2001.

The provincial government, with initial financial assistance of the United Kingdom Department for International Development – South Africa and a team of ILO technical advisors, teamed up with municipalities to bring local emerging contractors into labour intensive road and bridge construction and maintenance projects aimed at rehabilitating gravel roads in the province. These contractors, trained by the ILO, employed local labour to carry out the projects, resulting in each of these workers learning a new skill and earning an income for the duration of the contract period, thus improving not only their own lives but those of their families.

Ignatius Ariyo, Chief Director, Infrastructure Sector, EPWP in the National Department of Public Works (NDPW), said the EPWP was aimed at increasing the labour intensity of government-funded infrastructure projects to upgrade rural and municipal roads, municipal pipelines and storm water drains to improve access to water and sanitation. Training was provided through state training authorities, while the Department arranged for access to finance for learner contractors.

Creation of millions of jobs expected

"The EPWP has been very successful. We hope to create 4.5 million work opportunities or 2 million full-time equivalents by 2014 during Phase 2, which was launched earlier this year. In the first quarter ending in June 193,000 work opportunities were created, which is 30 per cent of the target of 642,000 for the 2010/11 financial year. So we are on course to meet our target," Ariyo says.

He adds that surveys had shown that the equivalent of 100 days of work had a positive impact on people's lives. "This is not a perfect solution to unemployment, but it is something. Public works labour-intensive programmes do not create permanent jobs. They are just an intervention for a period, but they do give people the skills to enter the formal labour market and play a role in the growth of the economy."

Kleintjie Mathabathe is the learner contractor installing pavements in the town on Mokopane in Limpopo Province. "I started by employing 10 people, but I now have 28 people working for me since May," says Miss Mathabathe. "My life has improved and so have the lives of the workers because we make a decent wage. I want to become the best contractor in Limpopo when I finish my learnership."

Her mentor on the project, Miss Gloria Ramdela, completed her learnership through the ILO in Lesotho, working first on the Gundo Lashu project before becoming a supervisor, site manager and now a mentor. "I show the contractors and the workers what to do, step back and watch. Then I advise and coach them and assist them with financial management and procurement processes," says the woman who now wants to become a civil engineer.

The role of the ILO

Mr Ariyo says the ILO contributed significantly to the EPWP in providing standards in the infrastructure sector, determining best practice, developing training manuals and assisting with training.

There are eight ILO technical advisors in South Africa. All are specialists in labour-intensive methods of employment. They provide technical assistance and advisory support to labour-intensive investment programmes at national, provincial and municipal levels and are involved in the overall management of the EPWP. They also coordinate activities in the provinces. "We also have two specialists advising the Government on policy and rollout in so far as these pertain to the world of employment," says Mr van Vuuren, Director of the ILO Office in Pretoria.

Mr Kwaku Osei-Bonsu, a senior specialist for employment-intensive investments in the ILO's Decent Work Team for Southern and Eastern Africa, would like to see the creation of a training facility in South Africa much the same as those in Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, the United Republic of Tanzania, and Uganda. "The reason for having a formal training centre is that you have permanent trainers who become more experienced as they run the training programmes," he says.

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The need for skills transfer

A major problem in South Africa is a lack of capacity, particularly technical and engineering expertise within the Department of Public Works, which has meant that the ILO's technical team in Limpopo often had to step in to perform departmental duties. Mr Osei-Bonsu said he would prefer a situation where the ILO was present in South Africa in an advisory capacity, where "we only bring expertise and enrich the nationals involved".

Mr van Vuuren concurs, saying that project management in South Africa is sometimes weak. "There needs to be a transfer of skills so that people can learn to run this kind of project." In his view, there needs to be a provision of skills into the market with retention happening through stronger leadership from government and emphasis on the way staff are managed internally, to create an environment where they will want to remain in the positions where they are needed. And Mr Osei-Bonsu concludes: "I applaud what has been done by the South African Government. Yes, there are challenges, but these are not insurmountable. They can be addressed if there is political commitment and there is a buy-in by all."

The ILO and labour-based public roads programmes in South Africa

Following advisory work during the development process of the National Employment Programme (NEP) as of 1994, the ILO's actual programme work in South Africa started in 1996, two years after the first democratic elections, with a programme of collaboration with the Universities of Natal and the Witwatersrand to introduce labour based road work and research through the development of new curricula and course materials for under- and post-graduate studies.

In 1996 and 1997 the ILO was requested by the National Department of Public Works to evaluate the Community-Based Public Works Programme which resulted in the South African Government realigning the Programme to address its major goals of poverty reduction, employment creation, local empowerment and skills development. A subsequent evaluation in 2001 enabled the Government to determine the success of the Programme and its impact on the quality of life of previously disadvantaged individuals.

From 1998 to 2000 the ILO provided the Department of Public Works with technical assistance, advising on policy aimed at integrating employment issues into the delivery and maintenance of public infrastructure. This work continues today, as does the capacity building in the Limpopo department of public works.

Following the success of the 12th Regional Seminar for Labour-Based Practitioners in Durban in 2007, a high-level mission for the implementation of a Global Jobs Pact (GJP) was undertaken by the ILO in South

Africa. A first draft of the GJP Country Scan for South Africa was submitted, identifying priorities such as the creation of green jobs, and maximizing the employment impact of infrastructure development.

The EPWP is highlighted and presented as one of the three countries showcased in the newly launched Innovations in Public Employment Programmes (IPEP) approach, an international course offered at the ILO's International Training Centre in Turin. "Their ability to impact on the multiple objectives of employment generation, income support, asset creation and social protection, and as a scalable response to specific circumstances, is a key strength of these programmes," says Mito Tsukamoto, a senior ILO expert for employment and investment policies.

In the meantime, the employment-intensive work approach in the Republic of South Africa has moved beyond traditional infrastructure and construction programmes. Public Works Programmes (PWP) and Employment Guarantee Schemes (EGS), said Dr Kate Philip, who led a strategy process on inequality and economic marginalization for the South African Presidency this year, had become "strongly associated with infrastructure and construction 'works', but this has changed, with examples of employment-intensive work in the social sector, environmental services, and multi-sectoral, community-driven programmes."

The ILO's Employment-Intensive Investment Unit (EMP/INVEST, EIIP) leads work on the development and implementation of employment-intensive approaches to infrastructure investment. EIIP supports governments, employers' and workers' organizations, the private sector and community associations worldwide in enhancing the employment content of infrastructure investments and improving access by the poor to basic goods and services. EIIP works in more than 70 countries.