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The role of Public Employment in the climate crisis

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Public Employment Programmes can play a key role not only in alleviating the crisis of widespread unemployment. They can also be harnessed to help to combat a range of social and environmental challenges, including the effects of climate change.

The climate crisis requires radical action: a swift transition towards a low-carbon economy, protecting and preserving the natural world, and supporting communities to adapt to environmental and structural changes. Even in the most ideal economic and political conditions this is a mammoth task with overt and hidden risks. In South Africa, these risks are pronounced. Alongside responding with urgency to the climate crisis, there is an imperative to address the untenable poverty, unemployment, and inequality that exists – all within a severely constrained fiscal context. With multiple overlapping challenges and limited resources comes the necessity to harmonise efforts to address development priorities and environmental concerns.

Public Employment Programmes (PEPs) use state funding to create employment and livelihood opportunities outside the usual structure of public-sector employment. With enduring and severe unemployment levels, more than 1.5 million people participate in these programmes each year where the work is directly aligned to the creation of public goods and services. At the same time, South Africa is committed to critical climate obligations, including the [Paris Agreement](#) and [Global Biodiversity Framework](#). These commitments mandate ambitious actions to cut greenhouse gas emissions and enhance resilience against climatic impacts, alongside extensive conservation and restoration efforts to safeguard biodiversity and ecosystems. Some of these ambitions are bundled into a legal framework through the passage of the [Climate Change Bill](#).

Currently, PEPs rarely integrate climate concerns strategically, while national climate policies do not fully recognise their potential in augmenting mitigation, adaptation, and conservation efforts. In this article, we draw on examples from the [Presidential Employment Stimulus](#) to highlight that PEPs have the institutional architecture in place to rapidly roll out programmes that can be strategically deployed **alongside** key climate policies to strengthen them, while ensuring that people and communities are not left behind.

Contributing to the ‘Just’ part of the Energy Transition

The expected economic benefits of decisive climate action include significant job creation, yet the transition also poses immediate challenges. Initially, job losses may outpace the creation of new roles, and there is a mismatch between the skills and locations of those losing jobs and the new opportunities emerging. This has implications for workers – but also for communities where the withdrawal of coal mines and other carbon-intensive activities pose profound challenges to local livelihoods. This is a real opportunity for Public Employment to contribute to a critical component of the Just Energy Transition Framework: the need for social protection, economic diversification, and development in the communities and local economies affected by the energy transition.

Public Employment can offer publicly funded, meaningful work opportunities to people in affected communities, where the effects of job losses resulting from the energy transition ripples through entire local economies. These programmes can also be tailored to the skill sets of people directly affected by job losses, which can alleviate income losses as well as the corrosive psychological and social impacts of unemployment and vulnerability. And as participants earn wages, this money flows back into communities, mitigating the impacts on small enterprises and the informal sector.

The scope of the work undertaken in Public Employment is broad and can augment the multiple social and environmental challenges that communities face. From an environmental standpoint, the work can be aligned to augment mitigation efforts, protect biodiversity, and build skills for jobs in a low-carbon economy. But it can also tackle local social challenges, which form part of a wider lens on addressing equity concerns in affected communities. For example, the Social Employment Fund – part of the Employment Stimulus - supports ‘work for the common good’ that has enabled local solutions to local problems: upgrading informal settlements, ensuring food security, innovating with waste recycling, and improving learning outcomes. These activities generate public goods and enhance human capital, contributing to improved health, education, nutrition, and social cohesion. This holistic approach – emphasising the social value of labour and the future that communities desire - can be a crucial intervention in achieving a just transition.

A tool to support adaptation and foster resilience

Climate change adaptation involves adjusting ecological, social, or economic systems to cope with climate-related changes. The impact of these changes are already ferocious. As Barbara Creecy, former Minister of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries, observes: “Climate change is here, and we have relatively little time to respond.” The toppling of temperature records alongside climate variability and extremes means more heatwaves, droughts, floods, and coastal storms. Without considerable acceleration of adaptation efforts, these effects will fall on the most vulnerable people: devastating livelihoods, compromising food and water security, and jeopardising development.

The tragic floods and landslides across KwaZulu-Natal in 2022, which researchers at Wits conclude were the “most catastrophic in terms of lives lost, infrastructure damaged, and economical loss,” are a heart-wrenching reminder of the urgency of enabling adaptation and building resilience. More than 450 people lost their lives, over 4,000 homes were destroyed as was R35bn in infrastructure. In the eThekweni Municipality, the Employment Stimulus is supporting initiatives such as the Transformative Riverine Management Programme, which aims to adapt the 7,400km of streams and rivers to the increasing climate risks that are likely to exacerbate extreme weather events. Also through the Employment Stimulus, the Department of

Science and Innovation partnered with the Duzi uMngeni Conservation Trust and other organisations to establish a community-based water management programme. The programme recruited 300 unemployed young people and trained them as “Enviro Champions” across the uMngeni catchment - which supplies water to more than 40 percent of KwaZulu-Natal’s population. The Enviro Champions monitor water quality, illegal dump sites, leaking sewers, and blockages across the catchment – and help clean them up too. Together, these programmes form a critical part of the Municipality’s climate adaptation response and its responsibility to safeguard people - all while creating employment for youth in marginalised communities.

Such adaptation activities can take numerous forms depending on context. There is strong potential for the work undertaken in Public Employment to be aligned with key priorities outlined in the National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy. Public Employment’s role could involve the implementation of nature-based solutions and support ecosystem or infrastructure-based adaptation. Work experiences can be – and in some cases already have been – structured around ‘climate-proofing’ physical infrastructure, wetland restoration, erosion control, coastal management, green urban infrastructure, and community-based disaster risk reduction to mitigate and adapt to climate risks.

Public Employment can also improve household resilience by introducing new types of assistance or modifying existing programmes to encourage livelihood diversification, new behaviours, and climate-compatible technologies. At an individual level, the income received from PEPs enhances the ability of households to absorb and mitigate the impact of climate shocks or variability. Moreover, the work experience or livelihood support can build adaptive capacity so that people can adjust and diversify their livelihoods to accommodate for changing socioeconomic or environmental conditions.

Through the Employment Stimulus for example, the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development has supported more than 180,000 subsistence farmers with production input vouchers. Some were also trained in organic farming and permaculture methods to adapt to the impacts of climate variability. Other participants have leveraged public employment to diversify their livelihoods by investing in productive assets. Examples are the National Youth Service and Social Employment, which both offer two days of paid work per week to act as ‘support scaffolding’ so that participants can explore additional economic activities to supplement their income. In the National Youth Service alone 20 percent of its 60,000 participants have transitioned into employment or self-employment activities after the programme.

Protecting and preserving biodiversity

In December 2022, South Africa joined 190 other countries in adopting the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework that involves placing 30 percent of the Earth and 30 percent of degraded ecosystems under protection by 2030. The Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE) has aligned this ambition within the white paper on Conservation and Sustainable Use of South Africa’s Biodiversity, which was approved by cabinet in April 2023. To achieve these targets however, the director of protected area planning and management effectiveness from the DFFE points out that more than 2.2 million hectares – about the size of Kruger National Park – needs to be added each year to the conservation estate.

Public Employment has a long history of supporting conservation and ecosystem restoration. In the 1930s during the height of the Great Depression in America, more than 300,000 young men

were employed through the Civilian Conservation Corps as environmental stewards - planting more than three billion trees, engaging in conservation projects, and fortifying the national park system. South Africa too has a long history of Public Employment to address environmental concerns. The Working for Water programme - which was introduced in 1995 – has cleared more than a million hectares of alien invasive plants.

The Employment Stimulus continues this legacy and has a conservation thread running through many of its programmes. The work undertaken in the environmental programmes and Social Employment Fund has touched the length and breadth of the country from coast to coast, including bushveld, grassland, fynbos, wetlands, mountains, water bodies, catchment areas – and urban areas, too. The work undertaken affects the air we breathe, the water we drink, the energy we use and the food we eat, supporting a wealth of biodiversity resources and ecological systems essential to life on earth and to the future of the planet. Given the scale of the challenge posed by the new biodiversity targets, there is a clear opportunity to further align and expand the scope of Public Employment.

Conclusion

Currently, there are more than 11.5 million South Africans with talent, skills, and passion who remain unemployed. “There is no shortage of work to be done,” as President Cyril Ramaphosa has said, “to address the many social problems in our society.” This is also true of the work that needs to be done to address the many environmental challenges we face. We need to transform our society to meet the scale of the climate crisis. We need to install wind turbines and solar panels, make our homes and buildings more energy efficient, transform the way we grow food and deal with waste, protect our water, soil, and biodiversity, and more. But there are also significant risks for people who will be affected by the climate crisis. Urgent and robust social protection measures need to be scaled up to support workers and communities who will be affected by the energy transition, while others need support to adapt and build resilience to the impacts of a changing climate.

We do not seek to rebrand public employment as environmental policy. Social scientists warn against the potential risks of forcing development and environmental policy together, which could reinforce, redistribute, or create new vulnerabilities to climate change and the energy transition. After all, the role of Public Employment is to create work in a context where unemployment is strongly associated with poverty and a host of adverse development outcomes.

Yet there is potential for employment creation through Public Employment to be better aligned to the future we are trying to build – to restore dignity and provide meaningful work to people in communities where unemployment has eroded hope, while taking care of the natural world and ensuring this beautiful country is liveable for future generations.