

A political economy analysis of youth (un)employment in South Africa



Evidence and practical pathways towards dignified, productive work for South Africa's youth

Key Messages

- » South Africa faces a missing jobs crisis, not a skills mismatch. With youth unemployment at around 60% under the expanded definition, the binding constraint is weak labour demand rooted in the structure of the economy. Skills training alone cannot resolve unemployment when the economy does not create enough jobs, and the mismatch discourse wrongly places responsibility on young people for a structural problem not of their making.
- » Youth labour market exclusion is deep, persistent and worsening. Between 2014 and 2025, employment among youth aged 25-34 years fell from 51.5% to 43.8%, while unemployment rose from 33.3% to 44.0%, an increase of 1.6 million unemployed young people. By 2025, more than three-quarters of unemployed youth had been out of work for over a year. COVID-19 was a structural break from which youth employment has not fully recovered.
- » Exclusion is layered and compounding. Black African young people account for over 90% of unemployed youth aged 25-34 years; young women aged 15-24 are 54% more likely than young men to be unemployed; and married young women are over twelve times more likely than married men to be economically inactive. Race, gender, geography and education each independently predict outcomes, and their effects compound.
- » The informal economy should be supported and protected, not formalised away. South Africa's informal sector is unusually small for Africa because colonial and apartheid policies dispossessed Black South Africans of land and repressed township enterprise. Practical place-based support, including safe workspaces, internet access, maker hubs, and action against extortion, will achieve more than registration drives and generic entrepreneurship training.
- » Agriculture cannot absorb youth as it does elsewhere in Africa, but rural value chains are an underused opportunity. Land dispossession under colonialism and apartheid means that subsistence agriculture is uncommon, and rural youth are among the most marginalised. Production input vouchers to 142,004 subsistence farmers under the Presidential Employment Stimulus (PES) and the Agriculture and Agro-processing Master Plan's supplier development commitments point the way: connecting rural producers to retailer value chains would address market access, one of the most significant barriers facing rural self-employed youth.
- » A three-pronged, integrated strategy offers the most coherent way forward. Self-employment support, public employment programmes and industrial policy must pull in the same direction rather than operating in silos. Reimagined public employment through the Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI) and the Social Employment Fund demonstrates that meaningful work opportunities can be created at scale.



Photo: Magnific

Introduction

South Africa's youth unemployment challenge is structural and historically rooted. The modern economy was forged through the mineral revolution and what has been described as the Minerals-Energy-Complex (MEC): a close link between mining and energy interests, supported by the state, that relied on cheap Black migrant labour while dispossessing Black South Africans of land and repressing self-employment and informal activity in urban areas. Unlike in most other African countries, relatively few South Africans can fall back on subsistence agriculture or a large informal economy because both were deliberately restricted. This structure has evolved rather than been fundamentally reconfigured since 1994: a few large conglomerates dominate most sectors, premature deindustrialisation has set in, and minerals and resource-based industries still accounted for 60% of exports in 2019.



Photo: Magnific

“On the expanded definition, which counts discouraged jobseekers, unemployment among youth aged 25–34 years rose from 33.3% in 2014 to 44.0% in 2025, and more than three-quarters of unemployed young South Africans have now been without work for more than a year. For a large and growing share of youth, unemployment is not a temporary transition between jobs but a chronic condition of exclusion.”

Young people bear the highest costs of this inheritance. Unemployment follows a distinctly age-graded pattern, driven by employers' reluctance to hire inexperienced workers, the protection of older incumbent workers, and the prevalence of jobs whose conditions young people regularly reject. By 2025, fewer than one in ten youth aged 15–24 years was employed, and expanded unemployment among youth aged 25–34 years reached 44%.

None of this reflects an absence of policy. Post-apartheid governments have transformed education and skills systems, created youth-specific institutions such as the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA), and run some of the largest public employment programmes in Africa. These interventions have broadened access to qualifications and provided some economic inclusion, but they have not transformed the structure of the economy that produces mass joblessness. This political economy analysis (PEA) therefore looks beyond formal policy frameworks to the underlying interests, incentives and institutions that enable or undermine change, and asks what entry points exist for reforming the political economy of youth unemployment in South Africa.



Research Design and Methods

The study employed a mixed-methods PEA that examines the structural, institutional and power dynamics of youth unemployment, complemented by an intersectional lens and significant youth participation. The quantitative component analysed the nationally representative Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) from 2014 to 2025, focusing on two cohorts, those aged 15–24 years and 25–34 years, who together make up approximately 35% of the population. The expanded definition of unemployment, which includes discouraged jobseekers, is used throughout because discouragement is widespread in South Africa, and the narrow definition substantially undercounts effective joblessness. Descriptive trend analysis was combined with multivariate regression models of employment status, formality, contract type and long-term unemployment, all controlling for gender, education, population group, marital status, province, geography and time.

Qualitative evidence came from key informant interviews with 35 expert stakeholders, comprising 12 academics and researchers, 12 government officials, eight civil society organisations and three employers, together with eight focus group discussions of 8–10 young people each across the Western Cape, Gauteng, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal, and a youth dialogue involving young people from all nine provinces.



Findings

1. Youth labour market exclusion is deep, persistent and worsening.

The eleven-year trend is one of persistent and in some cases deepening exclusion. Among youth ages 15–24 years, employment fell from around 12% in 2014 to around 10–11% by 2025, reflecting continued participation in education. The picture among youth ages 25–34 years is alarming: employment fell from 51.5% to 43.8%, unemployment rose from 33.3% to 44.0%, and the number of unemployed people in this cohort grew from 3.1 million to 4.7 million, an increase of 1.6 million young people.

Table 1. Youth employment status by cohort, South Africa, 2014 and 2025 (%).

Status	15–24 (2014)	15–24 (2025)	25–34 (2014)	25–34 (2025)
Employed	12.0	9.9	51.5	43.8
Unemployed (expanded)	23.2	26.0	33.3	44.0
Not economically active	64.8	64.1	15.2	12.2

Source: HSRC's analysis of QLFS 2014–2025, weighted; expanded definition of unemployment.

Unemployment has also become entrenched. The share of unemployed youth ages 15–24 years out of work for a year or more rose from 60.5% in 2014 to 73.1% by 2025, and from 68.1% to 77.1% among those ages 25–34 years. Long-term unemployment of more than five years grew from 32.0% to 44.5% of unemployed youth ages 25–34 years. Among the younger cohort, the dominant reason for unemployment is being a first-time job seeker who has never

In a country with approximately 60% youth unemployment, it was repeatedly emphasised that the lack of jobs, rather than alignment between young people's skills and labour market needs, was the primary problem.

worked, cited by 80.2% in 2025, confirming that this is primarily a school-to-work transition problem. As one young person in a Mpumalanga focus group put it, "When you are young and fresh out of school, they say you do not have experience, and when you finally gain some experience, you are told you are too old to qualify for opportunities."

The COVID-19 pandemic was the single most significant disruption of the period, and recovery has been incomplete, indicating lasting scarring rather than a temporary shock.

Policy and practice implications: The scale and duration of exclusion mark a structural problem that short-term, supply-side measures cannot resolve. Priorities include sustained support for first-time job seekers during the school-to-work transition and interventions that interrupt long-term unemployment before it becomes chronic.

2. Not a skills mismatch: a missing jobs crisis

Key informants were strongly critical of the "skills mismatch" concept, arguing that it distracts from the missing-jobs crisis and implies that better alignment of skills and jobs, rather than structural transformation of the economy, can resolve youth unemployment. As one expert put it, "it's a demand side problem... It's not about fixing unemployed people... It's a crisis of missing jobs." Employers themselves point to demand: asked what limits their hiring, factory owners answer "orders. If we have more orders, we'll take people. We can train people in six months to be a perfectly efficient machinist." The mismatch discourse is also vague and contradictory, and very little rigorous research has been conducted with South African employers.

Education nonetheless remains the strongest individual protection in the data. Completing matric nearly triples the likelihood of formal employment, tertiary qualifications raise the likelihood of formal work and written contracts five to twelvefold and roughly halve the risk of long-term unemployment. The point is not that education has no value; it is that supply-side investment cannot substitute for demand, and that blaming young people's qualifications misreads the problem.

Policy and practice implications: Rebalance effort from supply-side fixes towards labour demand and macroeconomic drivers of job creation; continue investing in education as the strongest individual protective factor; commission in-depth research with employers and workplaces, where the evidence base is thin; and make workplace-based learning components of TVET and skills programmes mandatory rather than optional.

3. An informal economy repressed by history, worthy of support on its own terms

South Africa's informal sector is markedly smaller than in comparable countries because the labour reserve system criminalised informal economic activity and townships were established without basic services, *"explicitly made to be places that could never sustain economic activity"* – (SA_KII_PUS_005). Research participants agreed that the sector holds potential for livelihoods but cannot be the solution to youth unemployment, and that the informal and formal economies are integrally connected. Many young people are already earning income informally: one young Gauteng trader selling snacks and stationery outside a school reported making about R1,000 a day in a bad week.

The biggest obstacles identified were municipal regulations designed for formal businesses, a lack of facilities, crime and extortion rackets that have become a national crisis crippling township economies, and poor access to finance. Support that pushes early-stage businesses to formalise and become "investment ready" was described as a waste of money; what works better is practical, place-based support. The NYDA grant programme was singled out as a well-conceived package of finance, equipment vouchers, mentorship and market linkages that does not exclude informal businesses, with 70–80% of beneficiary businesses self-reporting growth or stabilisation over five years, although it can support only around 2,500 of some 13,000 annual applicants.

Policy and practice implications: Provide community-based infrastructure in townships, including safe meeting spaces, internet, printing and "maker hubs" with shared tools; adapt municipal regulations to township realities and allow sole traders to operate unregistered in their early years; treat extortion and business repression as an economic development priority, not merely a policing matter; and expand packaged support along NYDA grant programme lines rather than generic entrepreneurship training.

4. Productive sectors are not producing enough jobs

Post-apartheid industrial policy has served the inherited heavy-industry core while adding the automotive sector,

which now accounts for approximately 20% of exports and generates significant upstream and downstream activity, with one manufacturing job supporting five other manufacturing jobs. Yet the overall policy mix was described as incoherent, pulling in different directions and therefore "diluted" in its efficacy. Youth have largely been sidelined from mainstream industry, pushed to the back of the employment queue by experience requirements and protections for older workers.

The "sunrise" sectors promoted for youth carry mixed prospects. Global business services and call centres create entry-level jobs quickly, but the work is pressurised and target-driven, prone to burnout, and *"cannot be the only sector that is earmarked for youth employment"* – (SA_KII_PUS_006). Tourism holds potential, but its benefits are geographically uneven, and heavy foreign investment in property can send value offshore. The green economy is the most strategically interesting: South Africa holds 33% of the world's manganese reserves and produces 70% of the world's manganese ore, alongside major vanadium deposits, yet exports about 90% of the raw materials used in batteries, with most of the value captured offshore. The South African Renewable Energy Masterplan (2025) now aims to build local value chains in solar, wind, and battery storage by 2030, and battery production could be coherently linked to the energy crisis, mineral beneficiation, and the existing automotive industry.

Policy and practice implications: Develop a coherent green economy and battery manufacturing strategy that links mineral endowments, renewable energy, beneficiation objectives and electric vehicle potential so that they pull in the same direction, subject to further feasibility research. Use sector Master Plans to set explicit, age-disaggregated youth employment commitments; make employment an explicit and monitored objective of industrial policy, with incentives conditioned on demonstrable job creation; and revisit the Employment Tax Incentive (ETI) in redesigned form, with a longer time horizon, a higher wage ceiling, stronger targeting of first-time job seekers and employer obligations to provide structured work experience and mentorship.

5. Agriculture, a suppressed livelihood and an underused value chain

Unlike in most other African countries, agriculture is not the default livelihood for South African youth. The labour-reserve system and the dispossession of land forced young Black men to migrate to cities for wages while subsistence farming and independent enterprise were repressed, so far fewer people make a living through agricultural activities than elsewhere on the continent. Where rural agricultural work exists, it can also be exploitative: key informants described the long history of the "dop system", under which farm labourers, particularly young women, were paid in alcohol rather than wages,

¹ Samir Amin's political economy analysis divided African societies into Africa of the Labour Reserves (including Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and most of Southern Africa), Africa of the cash crops (or of the colonial trade economy) and Africa of the concession-owning companies. 'Africa of the labour reserves' was characterised by racial segregation, with Black migrants permitted to enter fast-forming urban areas to work, but not to remain permanently. Families of migrant workers were held in rural locations, meaning the cost of reproducing labour was not the burden of the colonial/apartheid state but was carried by labour reserves elsewhere.

deepening dependency on employers and leaving abuses, including sexual abuse by those in positions of power, with little recourse.

Recent programmes show what support can look like. The Presidential Youth Employment Intervention (PYEI) names agriculture among its priority sectors; the Presidential Employment Stimulus (PES) allocated production input vouchers to 142,004 subsistence farmers, with applications administered by mobile phone in a way that requires no data or connectivity; and the National Rural Youth Service Corps had trained more than 25,244 rural young people by June 2021 in skills including agriculture. Youth engagement is uneven, however: urban youth find agricultural opportunities in public employment programmes unappealing and attend primarily to collect the stipend. The larger opportunity lies in value chains. The agriculture and agri-processing Master Plan already commit large retailers to source more locally, grow their supplier-development programmes and integrate local producers into supply chains so that they upgrade their capabilities, while the sector remains exposed to trade shocks, with the general 30% United States tariff threatening job losses, particularly in agriculture and autos.

Policy and practice implications: Operationalise the Master Plan commitments so that supermarkets integrate local and rural producers and actively build their capabilities, addressing market access as one of the most significant barriers facing rural self-employed youth; extend production input support to subsistence and small-scale farmers, building on the PES voucher model; design rural agricultural pathways around rural youth rather than expecting urban youth to take them up; and protect young rural women farm workers from wage and other forms of exploitation.

6. Trade, a regional opportunity in a turbulent world

Global trade is splintering into regional networks, and South Africa's traditional arrangements are under strain: preferential access to the United States has been disrupted, with a general 30% tariff on South African exports from August 2025 and hefty tariffs on autos, steel and aluminium under the renegotiated African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). At the same time, new opportunities are opening. Preferential trade under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) lifted South Africa's exports in the region from R485 million in 2024 to R1.386 billion in the first seven months of 2025, and China, now the largest export destination at approximately \$13.5 billion in 2025, is extending a zero-tariff scheme to certain South African products from May 2026. Key informants argued that South Africa, as the most advanced industrial economy in Southern Africa, should position itself as a regional economic hub, including as a supplier of renewable energy and related manufacturing

to the SADC region, although it has not yet assumed this role. Local trade matters too: the agriculture and clothing Master Plans already commit large retailers to source more locally and develop supplier programmes that integrate local producers into their value chains, a commitment with particular significance for rural livelihoods and market access.

Policy and practice implications: Make regional positioning an explicit objective of industrial policy, connecting to the AfCFTA opportunity and reducing dependence on commodity exports to distant markets; and actively operationalise Master Plan supplier-development commitments so that supermarkets and lead firms build the capabilities of local and rural producers, addressing one of the most significant barriers facing rural self-employed youth.

7. The digital economy: an enabler, not a panacea

Government programmes have expanded digital access substantially. SA Connect has established over 32,000 community Wi-Fi hotspots and connected 6,343 government facilities, and 79% of households reported some form of internet access in the 2022 census, up from 35% a decade earlier, while Operation Vulindlela Phase II is building digital public infrastructure, including digital identity and payments. At the top end of the economy, leading firms are digitising production, but robotics and automation are also displacing low-skilled labour, and connectivity and energy inefficiencies constrain smaller firms.

The most significant grassroots innovation is the SAYouth.mobi platform, a free public asset developed by Harambee under the PYEI, that has registered over 2.3 million young job seekers and matches them to earning opportunities, not only formal jobs. Its underlying insight is that young people "zigzag" in and out of work, so pathway management, rather than a once-off placement, is what the labour market requires. Key informants cautioned, however, that connectivity and platforms alone do not create decent work, and that youth need resources, connectivity, power and safe spaces to develop their own digital activities, ideally supported at the metropolitan level.

Policy and practice implications: Invest in reliable, affordable connectivity in townships and rural areas as a prerequisite rather than an afterthought; expand digital platforms such as SAYouth.mobi and integrate them with coaching and mentorship so digital access is complemented by human guidance; treat business process services as a transitional pathway with progression routes rather than a terminal destination; and support young people to become creators of digital tools and services, not only consumers.

² The term "sunrise sector" indicates an emerging area in terms of economic centrality, technological importance and employment opportunities

8. Gendered and spatial exclusion runs through everything

The SAYouth.mobi platform has registered over 2.3 million young job-seekers as a free public asset. Its design accepts that youth transitions are non-linear: opportunities may last weeks or months, so the platform manages pathways rather than once-off placements.

Gender shapes outcomes across the life course. Care responsibilities begin early, with girls collecting water, caring for sick and elderly relatives and sacrificing schooling; one key informant cited evidence that around 18% of female learners drop out due to family commitments compared with 0.4% of males. In the labour market, young women aged 15–24 years are 54% more likely than young men to be unemployed and twice as likely to be economically inactive. Marriage protects men but penalises women: married young women aged 25–34 years are over twelve times more likely than married men to be economically inactive, and employed women's greater likelihood of holding formal jobs and written contracts, a conditional advantage, reverses with marriage. Race and geography compound these patterns. Black African youth face the most severe exclusion even after controlling for education and location, indicating independent barriers beyond educational or geographic disadvantage. The Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and Northwest are systematically over-represented among unemployed and inactive youth. Rural youth account for around 41% of unemployed young people aged 25–34 years, and rural young people describe workshops and opportunities that are simply unavailable in deep rural areas, so many do not know where to start.

Policy and practice implications:

Design all programmes with an explicit gender lens, including childcare support, flexible scheduling, safe transport and deliberate targeting of young women; adopt dedicated rural and provincial strategies with ring-fenced funding and locally embedded implementation partners, since generic national programmes reach these areas last and least; and incorporate trauma-informed psychosocial support into youth employment interventions, given the documented effect of trauma on labour market participation.

9. Public employment as resistance to economic exclusion

South Africa's public employment programmes are among the largest on the continent, but they are not all created equal. The Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) met beneficiary targets yet paid very low wages, averaging R62 per day; offered short stints averaging four months; at times counted existing government jobs as new work opportunities; and became a mechanism for paying certain public functions below the minimum wage, thereby degrading the work. The Community Works Programme (CWP) pioneered community-based "useful work" but suffered capture, with R2.8 billion paid to intermediary agents over five years before their contracts were ended in 2023.

COVID-19 created the opportunity to do public employment differently. The PES has funded 2.5 million jobs and livelihood opportunities since 2020, with 84% of first-phase beneficiaries under 35 and two-thirds women. Its flagship, the Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI), has created over 850,000 job opportunities across more than 20,000 schools and is described as the largest youth employment programme in South Africa's history, using existing school infrastructure and teacher mentorship to address educational and employment challenges simultaneously. The Social Employment Fund (SEF) channels "work for the common good" through established civil society organisations, has created 140,000 jobs across more than 6,000 communities, and deliberately offers two days of work a week at the minimum wage so participants can pursue other livelihood activities. Work, participants stressed, has social as well as economic value: *"without work... no one listens to me in the family. I'm not included in family discussions or decisions, because I'm no one. I don't work; I don't contribute."*

Smaller programmes point to what makes support effective. In the Basic Package of Support for not in employment, education or training (NEET) youth, emotional distress decreases significantly after three coaching sessions, and around 40% of participants connect to education, training or employment after four sessions within about four weeks. The Year Beyond programme, which pairs a year of service with mentorship, has seen more than 70% of participants, and up to 82%, land a next opportunity in each of its 11 years. Both show the value of a caring, reliable adult and of support sustained through non-linear, "jungle gym" transitions.

Policy and practice implications: Fund additional, real jobs with dedicated budgets rather than re-counting existing posts; evaluate, strengthen and expand the BEEI, adding training and quality standards; scale the SEF model through civil society while protecting the design features that make it work; institutionalise mentorship and coaching within all large-scale programmes, employing trained young people as coaches; and secure dedicated budget allocations, since declining funding now threatens programme security.



Priority Policy Recommendations

The recommendations below flow directly from the evidence. The overarching message is that interventions must not operate in isolation: they need to be integrated so that they pull in the same direction, avoiding the diluted and disconnected outcomes that have characterised previous approaches.

1 | Adopt a three-pronged, integrated strategy

Combine self-employment and informal economy support, public employment programmes, and industrial policy into a single framework rather than as parallel silos. A programme that places young people in public employment should connect to local enterprise development; an industrial strategy that supports a new sector should specify the skills and public employment pathways that will fill it; self-employment support should be embedded in the economic ecosystem of a specific place and sector. Integration is a design principle, not a coordination mechanism.

Key actors: The Presidency, which convenes the Presidential Youth Employment Intervention (PYEI) and the Presidential Employment Stimulus (PES).

2 | Support young people through the school-to-work transition

Fund dedicated bridging programmes that provide guidance, mentorship and information during the critical period between school-leaving and first employment, when many young people slip through the cracks. Scale mentorship and coaching as an employment intervention, employing large numbers of trained youth as coaches, and reform TVET colleges so that connections with employers and workplace-based learning are mandatory rather than optional. Resist generic entrepreneurship training as a proxy for skills development.

Key actors: Government and civil society partners, building on the Basic Package of Support and Year Beyond models.

3 | Turn the informal economy into an opportunity, without forcing formalisation

Provide community-based infrastructure in township areas, including safe meeting spaces, internet access, printing, and maker hubs with shared tools and fabrication equipment. Adapt regulatory frameworks to township realities rather than requiring businesses to become “investment ready” before support; and allow early-stage sole traders to operate without registration. Tackle extortion and business repression as an economic development priority. Support self-employment as a bridge that builds experience and capability, and position the development of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) as complementary to lead firms rather than as an alternative economic strategy.

Key actors: Municipalities and the Presidency’s red-tape reduction work; the NYDA grant programme as a model of packaged support.

4 | Expand and deepen reimagined public employment

Formally evaluate, strengthen and expand the BEEI, with quality standards and integrated training, using the school in every community as an institutional platform. Increase funding for the SEF and further develop its technology architecture, retaining the ‘two days per week’ structure as a deliberate design feature that supports multi-activity livelihoods. Institutionalise mentorship and coaching within all large-scale programmes.

Key actors: Department of Basic Education and the Presidency for the BEEI; the Industrial Development Corporation, which manages the SEF, and civil society implementing partners.

5 | Create jobs in productive sectors through coherent industrial policy

Develop a green economy and battery manufacturing strategy that links South Africa’s manganese and vanadium endowments, solar and wind resources, the energy crisis and the existing automotive industry so that they reinforce one



another, preceded by feasibility research. Use sector Master Plans to set age-disaggregated youth employment targets, entry-level pathway requirements and learnership quotas. Pursue a rural supplier-development strategy, operationalising the agriculture and agri-processing Master Plan so that large retailers integrate local and rural producers into their value chains, and extend production input support to subsistence and small-scale farmers on the PES voucher model. Revisit the ETI in redesigned form, and make employment an explicit, monitored objective of industrial policy rather than an assumed by-product of growth.

Key actors: The Department of Trade, Industry and Competition and the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy, whose joint Renewable Energy Masterplan provides the vehicle; the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development for farmer input support.

6 | Position South Africa as a regional hub and actualise the potential of trade

Make regional positioning in SADC an explicit objective of industrial and energy policy, connecting to the AfCFTA opportunity as global trade regionalises and access to distant markets becomes less certain. Evolve existing sectors and build new ones that are more labour absorbing, better connected to regional markets, and capable of benefiting from the natural resource base rather than exporting raw materials.

Key actors: The Department of Trade, Industry and Competition and the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy

7 | Make the digital economy work for young people

Accelerate community Wi-Fi and affordable broadband in townships and rural areas as a foundational requirement, noting that data costs remain among the highest in Africa. Increase public investment in platforms such as SAYouth. mobi and integrate them with mentorship, coaching, and public employment referrals. Approach business process services with caution, positioning them as transitional pathways with structured progression, and invest in coding, app development and digital content creation so that young South Africans become producers of value in the digital economy.

Key actors: The Presidency's Digital Service Unit under Operation Vulindlela Phase II; Harambee and the National Pathway Management Network.

8 | Close the gaps: gender, marginalisation and social exclusion

Design every programme with an explicit gender lens, since marriage and care responsibilities significantly increase unemployment and inactivity risks for young women while having the opposite effect for men; childcare support, flexible scheduling, safe transport and deliberate targeting of women are minimum requirements. Address the spatial dimensions of exclusion through dedicated, ring-fenced rural and provincial strategies for the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and Northwest. Provide trauma-informed psychosocial support within all large-scale youth employment interventions, and train mentors and coaches in trauma-aware approaches.

Key actors: Government and civil society partners; Municipalities

What will make implementation work?

Integrate, do not fragment



Design self-employment support, public employment and industrial policy as one strategy that pulls in the same direction, using the PYEI and the National Pathway Management Network as the coordination architecture, to avoid the diluted, disconnected outcomes of previous approaches.

Fund real additional jobs



Allocate separate, dedicated budgets so that public employment creates real, additional positions, learning from the EPWP experience of counting existing government jobs as new work opportunities.

Work through civil society



Channel delivery through established civil society organisations with proven track records, as the SEF does, requiring 80% of funds to be spent on labour and avoiding newly created intermediaries.

Design for real livelihoods



Shift from an employment-based to a livelihood-based approach that recognises young people zigzag between opportunities; retain part-time structures, such as the Fund's two-days-a-week model, that let participants pursue other income-generating activities.

Evaluate and let evidence lead



Formally evaluate flagship programmes, including the BEEI and the NYDA grant programme, require disaggregated data by gender, race and geography, and complete the research agenda on scaling before national roll-out.

Policy windows and entry points

» The Presidential Youth Employment Intervention and the National Pathway Management Network already provide the coordination architecture for integrating programmes across government, civil society and the private sector.

» The Presidential Employment Stimulus has proved that mass delivery is possible through the BEEI and the SEF; securing dedicated budgets would consolidate the gains.

» The South African Renewable Energy Masterplan (2025) provides a vehicle for a coherent strategy linking minerals, energy, beneficiation, and the automotive industry by 2030.

» AfCFTA and the regional turn in global trade create the moment for South Africa to position itself as a Southern African economic hub, as preferential access to distant markets becomes less reliable.

» Sector Master Plans and the Presidency's red-tape reduction work provide existing commitments through which supplier development, township enterprise support and youth employment targets can be operationalised.

» Operation Vulindlela Phase II and SAYouth.mobi open a channel for combining digital public infrastructure with pathway support for young work-seekers.

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