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The crisis of missing jobs in a country full of work

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There is a shortage of jobs but no shortage of work to be done in our communities. What would it mean to design a strategy to address joblessness that is centred around the work that needs doing for the common good, rather than focusing only on the work that markets find valuable?

Democratic South Africa was born with unemployment as [one of its many wounds](#), and in the years since, it has remained at the top of the policy agenda. Today more than [four-in-10](#) working-age adults in South Africa are unemployed or too discouraged to keep looking for work.

We know that the experience of unemployment is a deeply corrosive one for both individuals and society. It registers in [poll](#) after [poll](#) as the problem that most worries us. The consequences of unemployment, too, are widely recognised. It makes people spectators in their communities: standing outside, looking in, unable to contribute. For young people especially, it [delays or derails the milestones](#) for social belonging. And because unemployment is the [single biggest determinant of poverty](#), it is also a mechanism through which inequality reproduces itself.

Framing a crisis

The way a problem is framed shapes the response. One reason that interventions to address unemployment have been insufficient, we argue, lies in the framing itself. When we say, "unemployment crisis," attention is implicitly directed to those without work: their qualifications and skills, their job-seeking strategies, their attitudes. The jobseeker becomes the problem to be solved. This has produced its own minor economy of supply-side interventions: another skills certificate, another work-readiness intervention, another CV workshop, and so on. When these fail, the focus turns to entrepreneurial mindsets and ambitions, even though successful enterprise requires capital, information, connections, and customers with disposable income - all factors that existing structural inequalities inhibit and joblessness itself erodes.

This diagnosis avoids a well understood, yet inconvenient, structural reality: there are not enough jobs. According to the [latest Quarterly Labour Force Survey](#), the formal sector employed 10.8 million people in 2015. Today it employs 11.5 million people. Over the same

period, four million people entered the labour force. Put differently: for every one formal job created since 2015, nearly seven people joined the labour force. At this pace of job creation – approximately 60,000 new jobs annually – it would be more than 200 years before we would have enough jobs just for the 12.6 million people unemployed today.

While there is a firm political commitment and progress on [structural reforms](#) and other policies to augment labour demand, the inconvenient truth is that even if demand doubles, triples or even quadruples in the coming years – the majority of unemployed people will not find jobs. If we want to tackle unemployment, we need to accept that neither formal wage employment in the private sector nor entrepreneurship will, on their own, resolve the exclusion of millions. We have to have multiple strategies working together that also builds the infrastructure and social protections for other forms of social inclusion.

The crisis of missing jobs

We suggest a reframing: South Africa confronts a crisis of missing jobs. A crisis of missing jobs occurs when an economy systematically fails to create enough decent jobs for people, despite both the existence of work that needs doing and people willing to do it. The diagnosis of the problem is located within the structure of the economy and what it incentivises, rather than with people seeking work.

An unemployment crisis tends to make us ask: what is wrong with the people who cannot find work? A crisis of missing jobs makes us ask: what is wrong with our society that it cannot create ways for people to contribute even though there is so much work to be done to make South Africa a better place to live in? A crisis of unemployment centres the individual. A crisis of missing jobs centres the system. In the former, the workseeker is deficient. In the latter, it is a systemic societal failure to provide sufficient forms of socially valuable and decently remunerated work.

To be more specific: The "missing" refers to the gap between the number of people who are searching for work and the number of opportunities the economy generates – formal, informal, and public. These jobs are missing not because we have run out of work that needs to be done (indeed, no one ever says there are too many doctors, teachers, community health workers, environmental stewards, artists, garbage collectors, and so on.) They are missing because the economic system – markets, institutions, investment – is failing to incentivise and create socially valuable work at the scale of need.

President Ramaphosa captured this tension in a 2022 [letter to the nation](#), announcing the Social Employment Fund. "I hold the view that even as millions of people are unemployed," he said, "there is no shortage of work to be done to build a better South Africa." This line deserves more attention than it received. What would it mean to design a strategy to address joblessness that is centred around the work that needs doing for the common good, rather than solely focusing on the work that markets find valuable?

The [Presidential Employment Stimulus](#) and the [Presidential Youth Employment Initiative](#) offer part of the answer. The employment stimulus, for example, has created more than two million jobs and livelihood opportunities since 2020. These are publicly funded programmes that channel state resources into work for the common good through initiatives such as the Social Employment Fund, the Basic Education Employment Initiative, and the National Youth Service. In other words, people are paid to do work that strengthens their communities and makes South Africa a better place to live. To give just one example, the

Social Employment Fund creates [1,650 work opportunities](#) that bring creative arts to 50,000 children across every province. In this one case, people are paid to create spaces where children can imagine, express, and find joy together. Public employment, at its best, can meet human and social needs that markets so often overlook.

However, public employment programmes have long attracted criticism. They are accused of creating work that is too brief and too poorly paid to change the conditions of people's lives or sense of purpose. Such outcomes are not inevitable; they follow from how a programme is conceived. When public employment is treated as a mechanism distributing income rather than a means of enabling meaningful work, its transformative potential is foreclosed. What the employment stimulus has shown is that the state and civil society have the capacity to create higher quality, better paid work that meets growing social and environmental needs. [These programmes](#) raise aggregate levels of employment and provides work experience, at scale, for a labour market that is unable to do so. There are economic benefits and spillovers for the wider economy, but also opportunities for participants to [build additional income streams](#) and develop more resilient and dignified livelihood portfolios. While most opportunities remain short term, this reflects programmatic and fiscal choices rather than any inherent limitation. There is ample room to build on what works, to expand successful initiatives, and to move public employment forward in a more ambitious and hopeful direction which is an aspiration endorsed in the [Medium Term Development Plan](#).

Still, expanding public employment is not, by itself, enough. Putting the structural, rather than individual, nature of joblessness back at the centre of analysis means asking difficult, longer term questions. Such as why is it that the kinds of work that sustain and enrich life - care, teaching, cleaning rivers, growing food, making art – remain chronically undervalued, or worse, invisible. What is needed, then, is a deeper reckoning with how we understand and calculate value in our economy.

There is, as the President said, no shortage of work. But there is a shortage of jobs. That difference matters. And, if we give it a chance to influence our policy, our discourses, and our imagination, perhaps we can address the crisis of missing jobs in a way that helps construct an economy which can create and sustain the conditions for life itself to flourish.

Notes

Zak Essa, Kate Philip, and Mokgadi Matuludi support the Presidential Employment Stimulus.

Tshego Walker, Mapaseka Setlhodi, and Akosua Korentang support the Presidential Youth Employment Intervention.

The authors write in their personal capacities.

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