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SOUTH AFRICA: Billion Rand public works programme launched

© East Cape Public Works

Public works programme aims to create jobs

JOHANNESBURG, 1 Sep 2004 (IRIN) - Next to Brazil, South Africa is said to be one of the most unequal societies in the world, prompting the government to place greater emphasis on poverty alleviation through public works programmes.

The multi-billion rand Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) was launched this week at a series of provincial ceremonies. But whether or not the programme will make a significant dent in unemployment and poverty levels is debatable, an analyst told IRIN.

Deputy President Jacob Zuma presided over the provincial launch of the EPWP in the economic heart of the country, Gauteng province, on Tuesday. Zuma said since 1994 the government had instituted various initiatives to alleviate poverty, create jobs and improve the quality of life of ordinary South Africans.

However, he noted that "most of these efforts were largely uncoordinated and, although progress was recorded under this period, successes were more sporadic and highly localised".

In February 2003 the government announced that it would invest more than R100 billion (about US \$15.5 billion) in infrastructure development that would help create jobs over the next five years.

"The aim is to transform the social life of the historically disadvantaged parts of our country and bring essential social services closer to the beneficiaries ... Part of that funding would be used to create massive jobs for the unemployed and poor sectors of our people, by identifying projects that have the propensity to use labour-intensive technologies in the supply of goods and services on behalf of government, without compromising on quality," Zuma explained.

The creation of these "short-term jobs", he said, would help to reduce unemployment. "The Expanded Public Works Programme was therefore born as a government intervention to achieve the following core objectives: job creation, skills development and improved social services".

According to Zuma, successful implementation of the programme "should, in the next five years, create work opportunities and improve the skills base of the population, while also ensuring that social services, including infrastructure development and environmental management, are enhanced".

Anna McCord, an analyst with the Centre for Social Science Research at the University of Cape Town, told IRIN that while the EPWP would create 200,000 temporary jobs annually, this did not match the extent of unemployment in the country. "The scale of 200,000 jobs a year is very small in proportion to the scale of the problem," she said.

Officially there are about 5 million unemployed people, unofficially the number rises to 8 million when people who have not recently sought employment are included.

The jobs created by the EPWP would be "short-term employment opportunities, rather than actual long-term jobs that are being created. They are not permanent jobs - it's only a period of months for which they will be employed - so [EPWP] is unlikely to have a significant impact on poverty, unless the jobs are more sustained," McCord noted.

As to the viability of the programme, McCord said: "It's not costly, as it's existing expenditure being shifted from capital-intensive production of assets to labour-intensive construction of assets. It does not represent major new expenditure."

Apart from focusing on public works programmes, there "is certainly space for improving social protection for the working-age unemployed". An estimated 3.9 million people were living in households without water or social grants, "living on less than R400 a month [just over US \$60]," she pointed out.

Unemployment will remain an enduring problem in South Africa, "as even with positive [economic] growth rates in South Africa, it is estimated that we will still have unemployment levels of about 30 percent among the unskilled [and semi-skilled]".

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