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Skills development for the unemployed

This section reports on the ways in which the National Skills Fund is being used to support skills development for the unemployed in different provinces, and the conditions that make for successful intervention projects.

The National Skills Fund and training of the unemployed

International studies on the impact of training for the unemployed have reported mixed results; some found that training has increased employment possibilities, while others have found that public job-training programmes did not help people finding jobs. Closer to home, RÈNETTE DU TOIT analysed the success of placements following training opportunities afforded by the National Skills Fund (NSF) — the government's mechanism for addressing skills development for the unemployed in South Africa — which up to now was largely undetermined.

The general approach was to conduct a statistical overview of the information on training opportunities contained in the National Skills Fund Disbursement Information System (NSFDIS), complemented by five provincial case studies (Eastern Cape, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and the Western Cape). The case studies focused on best practice projects to deepen the perspective on the dynamics of training.

A number of pertinent issues had an impact on the design and analysis of this study. First, the impact of the transfer of the NSF from the Department of Labour (DoL) to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in November 2009 caused substantial rearrangements in terms of communication, administration and management of current and future training initiatives.

Second, data on the placement of beneficiaries was absent from the NSFDIS. And third, there were limitations in terms of project content and data content in the records maintained at provincial level.

MEETING TARGETS

The National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS) Phase II set a target of training

450 000 unemployed, but failed to meet the accredited training target of 25%. The problem was not that there was a lack of training opportunities, as close to half a million such opportunities were afforded to the unemployed, but it's noteworthy that only a fraction (8%) of the programmes were accredited.

Moreover, half of the accredited training was in soft skills, namely those opportunities related to the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) infrastructure and environment life skills training. This is disappointing in the light of the many scarce skills in certain technical fields in South Africa, proving a point frequently made by the Minister of Higher Education and Training (HET), Dr Blade Nzimande, that too much money is spent on short courses that provide little lasting benefit to the unemployed in terms of skills development. These results also show that provincial offices had difficulty in aligning the NSF training with the existing scarce skills, or with other human resources development strategies.

PLACEMENT OF BENEFICIARIES

The five provincial case studies we investigated consisted of one or more projects each. Most of these projects were examples of best practice. Even though the beneficiaries were selected from a very small sample and the findings can therefore not be generalised, the placements in the selected projects were very positive.

The fact that 75% of beneficiaries were placed

is highly significant: the placements in the randomly selected projects appeared to be highly successful; the projects seemed good examples that can be replicated in future; and the complex institutional conditions for cross-departmental cooperation and state-industry collaboration (which these projects required) were often successfully met.

The Gauteng case study provides a good example of a project where the training opportunities afforded to beneficiaries led to the securing of sustainable employment. The Gauteng Accelerated Artisan Development Project used the NSF and Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) money to address burning issues, such as scarce skills, the alignment of skills development strategies, and the promotion of skills development for the unemployed. Furthermore, this project is a good example of a collaborative effort of the government and the private sector in terms of developing skills in scarce areas and creating jobs.

GENERAL BENEFITS AS EVIDENT FROM THE CASE STUDIES

Although international and local research is not optimistic about the impact of training programmes for the unemployed, it is generally accepted that participation in programmes of this nature does offer skills formation and short-term employment opportunities. It also provides participants with some income from work, or work-related tasks, as was evident from the case studies.



Our research showed that the most important benefits were the imparting of technical and generic skills, together with a work opportunity to put the skills into practice in a real work environment for a period of time.

For many unemployed people, the NSF-funded training provided one of the very few means of gaining access to both skills and a first job. Getting a first job is often very difficult, and the structure of the training, which included job placement, provided a means of overcoming that particular hurdle.

Benefits from the skills training accrued not only to individuals but also to families and the wider community. Where individuals were able — through their acquisition of technical skills, life skills, business skills and financial management skills — to move from unemployment to some form of part-time, permanent- or self-employment, income was used to improve the quality of life of direct dependents. Communities also benefitted from having a larger pool of locally available skills that they could employ, as well as from having a greater proportion of income earners who spent money on local goods and services.

ROLE OF PUBLIC FETs

The NSFDIS results showed that about R860 million of the NSF was spent on addressing the skills development of the unemployed between 1 April 2005 and 31 March 2010. This pool of NSF funding for the training of unemployed people created a private market of training providers

who had had to shut down their small enterprises when NSF funds were cut off.

In contrast, as the case studies illustrate, there has been no equivalent involvement of the publicly funded FET colleges and, that in NSF training, private providers were used more often than public FETs. In this regard, Minister Nzimande has repeatedly made the point that the public FET college system should be more responsive to sector-, local-, regional- and national-skills needs and priorities. The recent Green Paper on Post-School Education and Training highlights the expanded role that public FETs should play in future in education and training.

CONCLUSION

It was clear that there were certain conditions that made some projects more successful than others. These elements were, *inter alia*, projects that were well planned; projects where there was a need to develop skills in order to address poverty; projects that addressed scarce skills in a specific field; projects where the stakeholders had the same vision in terms of the aim of the project; and projects where stakeholders placed a high priority on their social responsibility and went the extra mile to make a project successful.

In terms of overall benefits the following two factors manifested: addressing scarce skills and providing beneficiaries an opportunity to obtain a qualification that is in demand; and alleviating poverty by investing in community projects.

On the one hand, projects where scarce skills were addressed and beneficiaries re-

ceived the opportunity to obtain a qualification that is in demand led to the securing of sustainable employment.

On the other hand, some of the case studies showed that projects initiated in communities to address poverty offered a sustainable outcome to many of the participants if they were provided with skills which they could use to deliver a service to the community. ◀◀


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