CHALLENGES FACING LABOUR-INTENSIVE PUBLIC WORKS PROGRAMMES AND PROJECTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

History has shown that labour-intensive methods of works have long been used in creating remarkable infrastructure works. Labour-intensive programmes generate more direct and indirect local employment opportunities and income by using locally available input and thus creating a greater demand for local products and services than high-technology programmes reliant on imported technology and equipment. Investment in infrastructure has a huge potential to redress the high unemployment and poverty levels in South Africa and also to correct the skill deficits in disadvantaged communities. From a theoretical perspective supported by experience elsewhere in Africa, there are reasons for considering that properly formulated labour-intensive public works programmes and projects could be established to construct and maintain the required physical infrastructure, thus creating employment, skills and institutional capacities. This paper will look at past African experiences in implementing labour-intensive programmes and projects with regard to their successes and problems. The paper will then critically look at the experiences and problems encountered in the implementation of labour-intensive public works programmes and projects in South Africa. The paper closes with some recommendations for the future.

Keywords

labour-intensive programmes and projects, unemployment, poverty.

INTRODUCTION

History has shown that labour-intensive methods of work have long been used in creating remarkable infrastructure work. Labour-intensive programmes generate more direct and indirect local employment opportunities and income by using locally available input (materials, simple tools and local labour) and thus creating a greater demand for local products and services than do high-technology programmes reliant on imported technology and equipment. Investment in infrastructure has a huge potential to redress the high unemployment and poverty levels in South Africa and also to correct the skill deficits in disadvantaged communities. Commitment to alleviation of poverty has risen on the government agenda and will stay one of the focal points. This is motivated by the fact that currently around 24% of the population lives on less than $1 a day. This is below the poverty line defined by the World Bank (World Bank, 1994). The levels of unemployment have been rising steadily over the years. The unemployment rate is an extremely important indicator of economic and social health. The level of unemployment was 7% in 1980; 18% in 1991 (McCutcheon, 1995); 15.7% in 1995 (Statistics South Africa, 2003); 30.2% in 2002; 27.4% in 2003; 25.6% in 2004; and 26.5% in 2005 (Labour Force Surveys (LFS) 2000 – 2005). The unemployment rate rose rapidly over the 1990s, then fell in 2003 and 2004, and rose again in 2005. This is due to a drastic fall in the demand for unskilled labour in the formal sector caused by structural changes in the economy as a result of a decline in the importance of the primary sector.