

Youth Unemployment

Understanding Causes
and Finding Solutions

Reflections on Education, Skills and Livelihoods



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On November 29th, 2012, the University of Johannesburg's Centre for Education Rights and Transformation' (CERT) hosted a workshop on 'Employment, Education, Skills and Training', with a specific focus on young people. The workshop was attended by almost 100 community activists, organic intellectuals, academic researchers, adult educators, union representatives and others, bringing together seasoned activists and young people. It was made possible thanks to funding from Norwegian People's Aid. The workshop programme is summarised at the back of this booklet.

Contributions to the workshop challenged many of the prevailing assumptions and contested some of the facts and statistics invoked in support of certain proposed solutions. Most importantly, the workshop raised some of the many alternative responses to the challenges of education, skills and livelihoods that are already being pursued in various local contexts.

This booklet attempts to summarise key points raised during the course of the day, with the aim of making them available to the widest possible audience, and promoting greater involvement by poor and working people and their allies in shaping these critically important debates. The authors together with other participants are also involved in the Education Policy Consortium's 'Post-Schooling Project'.

Authors: John Treat, with Mondli Hlatshwayo, Miriam Di Paola and Salim Vally

Cover image: Mondli Hlatshwayo, Sihle Zuma and Charlene Stephens

Workshop Programme Overview

Welcome Address	John Samuel, University of the Free State
Introducing CERT and Preview of Programme	Salim Vally, Centre for Education Rights and Transformation (CERT), University of Johannesburg
Education, Skills, Training and Employment: Towards an Alternative Conceptual Framework	Enver Motala, Nelson Mandela Institute (NMI) at Fort Hare University; Oliver Nathan, Wits Education Policy Unit
Discussion	
Skills, Training and Unemployment: Myths, Ideology, Policy and Practice	Siphelo Ngcwangu, Department of Sociology, University of Johannesburg; Miriam Di Paola, CERT; Malebo Mogopodi, National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA)
Debating the Youth Wage Subsidy	Niall Reddy, Alternative Information Development Centre (AIDC)
Discussion	
Responses to Unemployment and Poverty	Bobby Marie, Bench Marks Foundation; Gladys Mokolo, Itsoseng Project, Orange Farm
How Should We Respond to Unemployment and Poverty?	Ivor Baatjes, Centre for Integrated Post-School Education & Training (CIPSET), Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University
Summary Reflections	Enver Motala, NMI; Ivor Baatjes, CIPSET; Sheri Hamilton, CERT
Closing Remarks	Mondli Hlatshwayo, CERT

Feedback and suggestions for improvements are welcome. Please acknowledge the Education Rights Project/CERT if you intend using this booklet. This booklet should not be used for commercial purposes or for profit.

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Reading the word and the world
Changing the text and the context



Centre for Education
Rights and
Transformation

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How to contact us:

**Centre for Education Rights and
Transformation**

Cottage 8, Research Village,
Bunting Road Campus
University of Johannesburg,
Auckland Park, 2006

Tel: +27 11 559 1148

Fax: +27 11 559 1128

Email: charlenes@uj.ac.za

Visit our website:

www.erpbooklets.wordpress.com

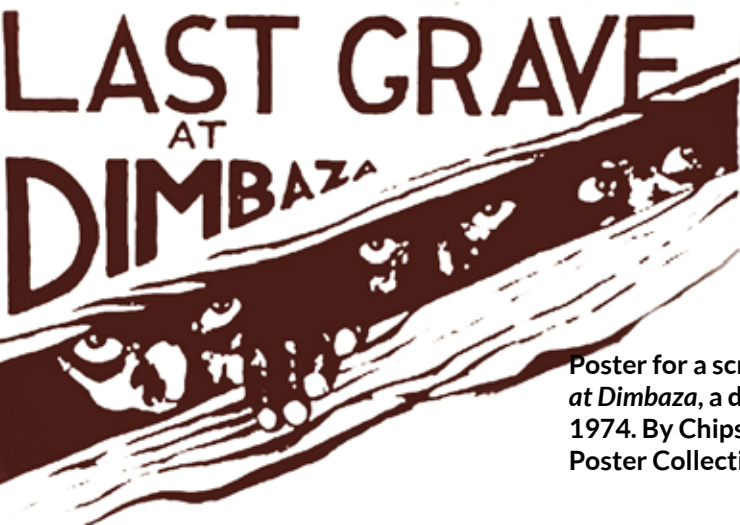
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Once you are on that road [to 'human capital' theory] – and most capitalist business ideologues are on that road – it is very easy to fall into the kind of discourse where one or another group of people is considered to be 'superfluous', 'over-concentrated', etc. The Hitlers and the Fronemans of the world eventually forced these people into railway trucks or lorries and transported them to their death in the gas chambers, or to their last graves in the many Dimbaza of our beloved country... Once the commodity value of people displaces their intrinsic human worth or dignity, we are well on the way to a state of barbarism. Unless and until we bring back into our paradigms, and thus into our social analyses, the entire human being and the ways in which human beings can live fulfilled lives beyond their mere economic needs, we will continue to promote anti-human philosophies and policies that ultimately tend to work to the benefit of those who have, and to the detriment of those who do not.

– Neville Alexander, *Race is Skin Deep, Humanity is Not*



Poster for a screening of *Last Grave at Dimbaza*, a documentary made in 1974. By Chips MacKinolty, Earthworks Poster Collective, 1974-75

Introduction

Almost every day in South Africa, we hear or read about the ‘problem of unemployment’, the ‘crisis in education’, or about a ‘shortage of skills’, or the ‘high costs of labour’, that ‘prevent businesses from hiring people’. These phrases are repeated so often, and with such conviction, that one might easily assume their meanings are clear, well understood and widely agreed. This could not be further from the truth.

This booklet will interrogate these oft-repeated phrases and identify some of the assumptions behind them, in order to ensure we understand the challenges that need to be solved before proposing specific actions to solve them. Failure to understand the challenges we need to solve may lead us to take actions that unintentionally make the situation worse, or that create new problems. The stakes are high, and there is a real risk that we will perpetuate conditions that have allowed so many to fall further behind during the past 18 years, even while others seem to get so far ahead.

In thinking about these questions, we propose to keep in mind two broader questions that should guide any solutions we may eventually propose:

- What is our vision of the world we want?
- What approaches to education, training and skills development are most likely to help us create that world?

Obviously we will not be able to answer these two questions fully within the scope of this booklet, but our hope is that it will be useful as a reference guide and tool in developing and advocating for policies, decisions and actions that place the needs and interests of people – and especially young people – first.

Our hope is that this booklet will assist educators, learners, parents, activists, administrators, elected officials and others to participate in these discussions from a position of deeper understanding – including an understanding of some common misperceptions and misrepresentations. In this way, we hope the booklet can make a small contribution toward creating a safe, prosperous and vibrant society that truly reflects the wishes and aspirations of the vast majority of its people.

Defining the Problem

Almost without fail, the ‘problem of employment’ and the ‘crisis in education’ are discussed in ways that suggest these are essentially the same thing – or at least that they can only, and must, be addressed together. We hear about the urgent need to ‘create jobs’, but we are told this is difficult if not impossible to do, because of a desperate ‘shortage of skills’ that we are told exists among South African workers. These difficulties are increased, we are told, by trade unions that are ‘too strong’, and a legislative regime that is not sufficiently ‘business-friendly’. Taken altogether, these conditions are said to make vast numbers of South Africans effectively ‘unemployable’.

In order to begin to clarify what is going on here, we must consider a few questions by way of clarification:

- What exactly is the ‘problem of unemployment’?
- What exactly is the ‘crisis in education’?
- Is there a ‘shortage of skills’? If so, how should we understand it?

Once we have clarified those initial questions, we will be in a better position to consider a broader question that underlies these – a question that goes to the heart of the matter, and that is key to determining how we address them:

- How should we understand the relationship between education, skills development and employment?

This is important because a certain sort of answer to this question is often taken for granted: that the essential purpose of education is to prepare those receiving it for ‘jobs’ – in other words, to make them ‘employable’ within a pre-existing system that we should simply accept. As soon as we begin to take seriously that this is not necessarily the only way to think about these problems, we can begin to develop a wider range of proposals for how to meet the needs of people and create the kind of society we want.

We need to develop ideas and concepts which help us to understand the current crisis of capitalism, especially in a South African context. The concept of 'useful work' may help in understanding what is being done by people in working class communities. This work involves community literacy, home care, pre-schooling, community gardening, school feeding schemes and many other activities. This work is a response to unemployment and the generalised economic attacks on the poor. The concept of 'useful work' allows us to understand how solidarity expresses itself among the youth and the unemployed in a context of poverty and unemployment. Of course there are challenges in co-operatives and other community projects but, like in any struggle, there will always be challenges and obstacles. Our task is to organise so that we can confront and overcome these obstacles.

- Educator and activist, Enver Motala



What causes unemployment?

Although the point is rarely mentioned in the context of these debates, one point we should keep in mind is that unemployment is a structural feature of capitalism. In other words, under capitalism, unemployment is guaranteed. This is especially true under the form of capitalism dominant in the world today, often referred to as 'neo-liberalism', and particularly in South Africa with its unique history of deeply and officially racialised exploitation of workers.

By maintaining a pool of unemployed workers, a capitalist economy guarantees there is always a pool of potential workers available to be employed quickly when the economy expands. By maintaining this pool of unemployed people, the system also provides 'leverage' for bosses to keep wages low, since they can more easily fire workers who demand better conditions if there are many others who would eagerly replace them.

This process of corporate, neo-liberal globalisation – which began in the 1980s with the removal of many restrictions on trade and financial transactions – was neither 'natural', 'inevitable', nor unexpected. On the contrary, it was designed on the basis of ideas proposed by some mainstream economists, and implemented intentionally by governments on behalf of capital, under pressure from international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). It is a process that continues to this day, and has played a dominant role in creating the ongoing global financial crisis that began in 2007-2008.



Youth are passed through schools that don't teach, then forced to search for jobs that don't exist, and finally left stranded in the street to stare at the glamorous lives advertised around them.

– Huey P. Newton

The consequences of this process of globalisation on the working class internationally have been profound. First, it has increased and spread competition, forcing companies to cut the costs of production, including by lowering wages. Second, it has encouraged financial speculation as an alternative approach of profit-making and capital accumulation, with the result that capital created by workers in the real economy – in factories, in mines, on farms, etc. – are not reinvested in production, or used to increase wages or provide training to workers, but are invested in the financial market in hopes of gaining profit without the problems associated with production. Third, the increased ‘casualisation’ of work in the name of ‘labour flexibility’ – which has been made easier by technological innovation – has further weakened the position of workers by making them more easily replaceable.

South Africa’s textile industry provides a grim reminder that vast numbers of highly skilled workers can lose their jobs very rapidly, for reasons that have nothing to do with any failure of the education system, nor with any lack of skills, ability or eagerness to work on the part of the workers themselves. A recently completed PhD thesis by Mondli Hlatshwayo¹ on ArcelorMittal Vanderbijlpark (previously called Iscor SA) demonstrates that this plant has lost almost 50,000 workers since 1988. Similarly, COSATU estimates that South Africa has lost between 75,000 and 85,000 clothing and textiles jobs in recent years. These were workers with very high levels of skill, built up over many years through actual work, as well as additional investment in training. These workers lost their jobs due to a system that compels employers to pursue profits for their shareholders even at the expense of the wellbeing of people.

Similarly, employment of South Africa’s gold and platinum miners is subject to fluctuations in the price of these metals globally, on currency exchange rates, and on investment decisions made by capitalists, regardless of the levels of skill, experience or training these workers have. As Enver Motala and Salim Vally have written:

Whole towns and villages disappear as producers of particular commodities or mining activities ‘disinvest’ once extractable ores are depleted or production plants are moved. Whole cohorts of technologically trained ‘human capital’ lose their relevance to the

¹ Hlatshwayo, Mondli (2012), ‘A Sociological Analysis of Trade Union Responses to Technological Changes at the ArcelorMittal Vanderbijlpark Plant, 1989-2011’

labour market once new substitutive technologies are introduced and no amount of 'skills training' will resolve the resultant unemployment.²

One implication of this is that under current policies, long-term planning – for example, attempting to devise a national skills development plan that will respond to the wishes of business for a skilled workforce – is virtually meaningless from the outset: many of the major factors that will ultimately determine its effectiveness simply cannot be taken into account without a change in policies.

With economic globalisation, states became more beholden to market forces, and the context of political pressures confronting national governments shifted. Although these pressures are very real, it does not mean that individual states are simply 'at the mercy' of forces over which they have no control. National policy changes to facilitate globalisation are themselves made by governments, and although global market forces place limits on the range of state policy, there is no obligation to adopt policies that further promote neo-liberal approaches to economic development, with devastating consequences for poor and working people. This is not to minimise the power of international organisations, foreign governments, transnational corporations and financial institutions to penalise or weaken – sometimes using military force – countries that pursue an alternative course. However, to suggest that South Africa has no choice is simply wrong. Recent developments in such countries as Venezuela, Uruguay and Bolivia show that national governments are not 'captives' of globalisation.

The important point to be taken away from this discussion is that the causes of unemployment have very little to do with how skilled or educated the workforce is. Rather, they have to do with both general features of capitalism, and with specific economic policies that have been promoted by international organisations and adopted by most governments in the world. Capitalism inherently requires a level of unemployment in order to function, and the policies that have been promoted in recent decades have tended to make this situation worse for working and poor people, by shifting the balance of power in society even further in favour of bosses and political elites.

² Motala, Enver and Salim Vally, draft introduction to a forthcoming book on education, work and society.

What is the 'problem of unemployment'?

Because there are different ways of measuring unemployment, estimates of unemployment vary considerably. Regardless of the specific approach, however, it is universally recognised that millions of people do not have any meaningful source of income, or any other means of meeting their basic needs. Officially, the unemployment rate is estimated to be around 25%;³ unofficially, it is recognised to be closer to 50%.⁴ Estimates of unemployment among young people between the ages of 15 and 24 have been as high as 74%.⁵

South African companies have been allowed by government to remove enormous amounts of capital from the country in recent years. Some of these companies are: BHP Billiton (formerly Gencor), South African Breweries, Anglo American, Old Mutual and Liberty. At a minimum, it is clear that hundreds of billions of Rands have been removed from the country since 1994, and possibly much more. These profits were created by South African workers being paid extremely low wages,.

At the same time as millions of South Africans remain unemployed, **South African corporations are estimated to be holding more than R500 billion in cash reserves** which they refuse to invest in ways that would create employment – simply because they don't believe their investments would be sufficiently profitable.⁶

Whatever the statistics on unemployment, it is clear that millions of South Africans live under very difficult conditions, and do not have the means to live decent lives, with even minimal security and basic comforts. Notice,

³ www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2013-02-06-the-meaning-of-numbers-labour-force-survey-q4/

⁴ www.iol.co.za/business/business-news/sa-unemployment-rises

⁵ www.iol.co.za/business/business-news/74-percent-of-youth-under-24-years-are-unemployed

⁶ <http://www.bdlive.co.za/articles/2012/06/18/cash-hoard-tops-r530bn-as-firms-hesitate-to-invest-amid-uncertainty>

however, that this is not quite the same thing as not being employed. This is the difference between having employment and having a livelihood. **Being employed – having a job – is one way of making a living, but it is not the only way.**

In the past, many people were able to meet many of their immediate needs by working on the land – land that had been used by their families or communities for many generations. In this way, they could produce the food they needed for themselves, but could also produce additional food, which they could then sell or trade to others. These ways of making a livelihood became much more difficult when large numbers of people were forced off the land they had lived on for many generations. This process of forcing people off the land served various purposes, but one of the main ones – not only in South Africa but around the world – was to create a large group of people who had no way to meet their basic needs except working for someone else.

These historical processes are described sometimes as ‘clearances of the land’, as ‘enclosure of the commons’, or as ‘colonial dispossession’, and they were an essential part of the creation of what is sometimes called a ‘reserve army of labour’: a large group of people who must work for wages in order to survive. The larger and poorer this group of people can be made, the lower the wages some of them will accept in order to have some kind of income. We should keep this context in mind when we consider proposed ‘solutions’ to the ‘problem of unemployment’.

The area of post-school education is complex and challenging but it's also unique. The formulation and development of educational policies must be engaged by people's organisations. We need to re-imagine institutions of further education. Public policy must not be left in the hands of so-called experts. The poor and dispossessed are excluded from policy making and the state is not neutral, but we have an opportunity to help shape policy and institutions.

– John Samuel

What does it mean to be 'unemployed'?

First, we must leave aside the question of very wealthy people who do not 'work', but who live off their accumulated wealth, or from the labour of others through profit-making investments. These people are not 'employed' in the sense we normally mean – but they are also not normally counted as 'unemployed'.

Even within modern economies, there are people who pursue livelihoods in ways that are not simply through typical 'employment'. For example, there are many people who work 'independently', usually selling services to various 'customers'. Of course, such people still 'work for others' in the sense that they must sell their products or services to someone who will purchase them. Their customers may or may not be part of the 'formal economy'. In some cases, people will provide services in exchange for other goods or services, instead of taking payment in cash.

Another small portion of the population work together in groups as co-operatives, where everyone contributes their own efforts and participates in the decisions of the group. Co-operatives must generally sell what they produce to others, but again this may or may not be part of the formal economy, and may or may not always require payment in cash.

Another way in which people may secure a livelihood is through certain kinds of government support programmes, such as a 'basic income grant', where people are guaranteed a certain amount of income each month that will allow them to meet their basic needs. This may be justified on the basis of people being unable to find employment for a certain time, or on the basis that they are studying, or training for a new position, or simply on the basis that we believe everyone should have a guaranteed basic income in order to survive. Such schemes are typically opposed by business interests, who complain that such people are 'a drain on the economy', or that providing support will 'encourage dependency'. Of course, such income schemes also mean that fewer people will be prepared to accept employment from businesses working for low wages under bad conditions.

Everyone needs a livelihood – a way to live – but there are other ways to have a livelihood besides being ‘employed’ in the classical sense. When we treat these as essentially the same, we risk blurring the distinction between the needs of people to make a living, and the ‘needs’ of businesses to make a profit. Within capitalism, these are often treated as essentially the same thing, for a very simple reason: Capital benefits to the degree that people depend on employment within a capitalist enterprise in order to obtain their livelihoods. The confusion that results from treating these as essentially the same is one of the key factors that allow capitalism to exploit workers more effectively.



Kliptown 2008, Daniel Lanteigne

The importance of understanding this difference very clearly is that it can significantly affect how government uses its resources to help people, by creating opportunities for them to live better lives. Often, the assumption is made that ‘jobs’ are the obvious, correct answer to the problem of livelihoods, and that government should set its policies and direct its support to encourage businesses to hire more people. It might make sense to approach the challenge this way in some cases, but each case must be evaluated on its own, and we should not overlook other options that may create more or better opportunities for people and communities, and that may be more effective at helping us build the kind of world most of us want.

Is there a special problem with ‘youth unemployment’ and, if so, how should we address it?

The issue of ‘youth unemployment’ is often singled out as a special problem requiring specific attention. In one way this is understandable: most people recognise that younger people deserve special consideration in the decisions we make about how to arrange our societies, because they are going to be affected by those decisions longer than older persons.

One challenge we face in trying to address the problem of youth unemployment is that it must be addressed as part of the much larger problem of unemployment in general. Otherwise, changes we make to try to improve the situation of younger people might create problems for other parts of the population. For example, we might create a situation in which employers simply replace older workers with younger ones – long before the older workers are too old to work, or have access to other sources of livelihood – so that the overall situation doesn’t change, or even becomes worse. While this may be an improvement for those young people who gain employment, it can lead to other problems for society as a whole.

One consequence of such a ‘solution’ – whether intentional or not – could be simply to further weaken workers as a whole in their interactions with employers, by creating divisions between segments of the population who could be stronger if they worked together as allies. If we really want to protect the interests of working people, we should look rather for solutions that improve opportunities for young people without creating other problems – without simply ‘trading’ one group of workers for another.

Given these assumptions, it is easy to believe that the basic problem is simply that the education system is failing to teach students the skills and knowledge that are needed by employers, and that our policy interventions should be aimed primarily at solving this ‘problem’. As we have already seen in the previous section, however, the term ‘unemployment’ itself already hides some important questions. For young people, as for other people, there is a difference between not having enough interesting, useful or creative things to do, on the one hand, and not having access to the resources needed in order to get along in life, on the other: to eat,

to buy clothes, to socialise with friends, and so on. It is often assumed automatically that young people should spend a large amount of their time working – most often for someone else – and that getting paid for doing this work is really the only way, or the best way, for them to meet their needs. It is often assumed, in other words, that education and training should be orientated primarily toward this outcome: toward making young people into good future employees. We will discuss the whole question of ‘skills’ in more detail below, but we should first consider a specific proposal that some people believe can help to solve the challenges young people face.

What about the ‘Youth Wage Subsidy’ that has been proposed? Is that a good solution to the challenges we face in South Africa?

One proposal that has been made for addressing the issue of ‘youth unemployment’ – a proposal that treats it more or less in isolation, however – is the ‘youth wage subsidy’ (YWS), which has been promoted by both the National Treasury and the Democratic Alliance. The specific proposal is to provide financial support to businesses on the condition that they hire young people. At its legotla in early 2013 the ANC reiterated its support for the YWS, and proposed that government should adopt it as policy. After initial reports suggesting that COSATU had agreed to the scheme – reversing its long-standing opposition – it emerged in the following days that these early reports had been erroneous, as COSATU re-stated its opposition. At the time of printing this booklet, the proposed scheme remains a point of contestation.

The specific proposal is that an employer hiring someone between the ages of 18 and 29 will receive back from the government half the value of that worker’s salary for a period of 2 years, as long as the employee’s salary is less than R60,000 per year. The scheme is proposed to run for a period of three years, at an estimated cost of R5 billion. Over this period, it is estimated that the scheme will subsidise 423,000 jobs, of which between 133,000 and 178,000 will be new jobs – in other words, jobs that would probably not have been created without the ‘youth wage subsidy’ programme being in place.⁷

⁷ Bisseker, Claire (2012), ‘Wage Subsidy: The Kiss of Death’, www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-292573199/wage-subsidy-kiss-death.html; Mashele, Prince

The argument is that such a scheme will encourage businesses to hire young people they would not otherwise hire, because they are considered 'too expensive', 'low skill' and generally 'unemployable'.

One criticism of the proposed youth wage subsidy scheme as it has been formulated is that it simply will not make a meaningful difference to the problem. In order to make a serious improvement in the employment of young people, it would be necessary to create several millions of jobs – perhaps as many as 5 or 6 million – many times more than the relatively small number of jobs estimated to be created by the scheme as it has been proposed.

Before we propose simply pursuing the proposed subsidy scheme on a much larger scale, we should pause and consider whether it is even the right approach.

Those who promote the youth wage subsidy generally rely on various studies from overseas that they claim provide sound evidence in favour of the scheme that has been proposed in South Africa. However, as Prof. Christopher Malikane has shown, the evidence from overseas that is offered to support the case for a youth wage subsidy in South Africa does not actually provide the needed support. By reviewing studies from the UK, US, Germany, Turkey, Colombia and Argentina, Prof Malikane shows that none of the studies referred to from these countries provide support for the YWS in South Africa, and some of them even undermine the case made in its favour.⁸

For example, a report by Katz (1996) notes that while there is some evidence to suggest that employment subsidy programmes in the United States have brought improvements for disadvantaged adults (particularly women) when combined job search assistance and job development programmes, such an approach 'does not appear very effective for out-

(2012), 'Youth Wage Subsidy Not a Magic Wand', Centre for Politics and Research, www.politicsresearch.co.za/.../youth-wage-subsidy-not-a-magic-wand.aspx; both references cited in Rudin, Jeff (2012), *Youth Wage Subsidy: Difficult Questions with Straight Answers*, Alternative Information Development Centre (AIDC).

⁸ www.amandlapublishers.co.za/home-page/1439-another-myth-about-the-youth-wage-subsidy--by-christopher-malikane

of-school youth from poor families.⁹ Reports from both Columbia and Argentina regarding similar initiatives provide, at best, only the most tenuous evidence of either applicability to the South African context, or any effectiveness in addressing youth unemployment generally.

Similarly, reports cited by the National Treasury regarding both Germany and Turkey relate to programmes in those countries that did not target young people. In the case of Germany, the report's authors conclude that wage subsidies 'may increase the employment prospects of supported workers to a considerable amount' – but the programme in question targeted workers aged 50 and above. The report cited for Turkey also did not focus on young people, and furthermore concluded that the observed increase in employment was the result of a 'surge in formalisation' – i.e., businesses using the programme as an opportunity to register already employed but unregistered workers – rather than any actual increase in employment, regardless of the age of the employees in question.

Given such questionable evidence in favour of the sort of youth wage subsidy scheme that has been proposed for South Africa, we might begin to wonder why such a scheme might have been suggested at all – that is, we might consider the possibility that it actually serves a very different purpose from what appears on the surface, and from what is offered in its justification. Since it is designed to benefit only a specific part of the working class – unemployed young people – we might even consider the possibility that its actual effects would be to create or deepen divisions between unemployed young people and other workers. In other words, we might consider the possibility that the 'youth wage subsidy' would simply serve to weaken the working class as a whole, rather than truly addressing the problems that leave all working people in South Africa vulnerable to exploitation. Although it is always difficult to determine motives, this interpretation would seem to be consistent with a broader pattern of undermining workers and trade unions that is well established and widely recognised.

⁹ Lawrence F. Katz (1996), 'Wage Subsidies for the Disadvantaged', National Bureau of Economic Research, www.nber.org/papers/w5679

Is there a shortage of skills in South Africa?

In trying to answer this question, we have to ask again what kinds of skills we are talking about. Often discussions of skills and employment focus only on a very narrow range of skills: the skills that will encourage someone to hire them.

In addition, in South Africa as in many other countries, there is an added emphasis on formal qualifications and formally recognised skills. In some cases there is a good reason for this – for example, if you choose to go to a doctor or a dentist, you may wish to be sure that this person has the formal training they claim to have. However, in many cases, formal qualifications may have little to do with a person's skills, or their abilities to perform effectively in a particular role.¹⁰

Taken together, this emphasis on formally recognised skills for employability is almost certain to lead to the conclusion that there is a 'shortage of skills' – because what counts as 'skills' has been defined in an extremely narrow sense, and entirely around the requirements of business for profitability. By defining skills in this narrow way, business is able to put even more pressure on working people to meet the specific 'requirements' of business in order even to be considered for employment.

People need many different kinds of skills in life, and government should see its role in helping people to develop all of these skills. These skills include:

- Skills to earn a livelihood, if they are able to do so, whether through self-employment, co-operation with others, formal employment, or through knowing how to access social services they need during times when they are unable to earn a living themselves;
- Skills to find information they need in order to make important decisions – about their education, about their careers, and about their future;

¹⁰ In many cases, especially jobs that do not require very specialised skills, the emphasis on proof of formal qualifications seems to have more to do with making it as easy as possible for the employer to hire someone, without having to devote much time to figuring out who would actually be the best candidate for the position.

- Skills to protect and improve their health and well-being, and to obtain the support they need from others – including from the government – that can help them protect and improve their health and well-being;
- Skills to resolve disagreements with members of their family, with their neighbours, or with colleagues;
- Skills to participate in democratic political processes – in their schools, workplaces and communities, and as stakeholders in society more generally.

It is probably already clear that one problem with the ‘debate’ about education, skills and employment is that it is focused almost entirely on the first point above – and even then, only from a specific perspective that is defined by the needs of businesses to make a profit. **This is why, when we ask what kinds of skills are needed, and by whom, it is essential that we ask who benefits most from the different choices that are proposed about which skills to develop and promote.**

The problem is simply that the kinds of skills that are most often spoken about as ‘necessary’ are those that are most likely to help meet the requirements for businesses to make a profit, no matter what may be the larger consequences for society of the particular ways in which those businesses make their profit. These are not necessarily the same as skills that people need in order to meet their own requirements for living, or to make a useful and satisfying contribution to their communities and their societies.

In light of these considerations, we might be tempted to ask whether all of the talk about a ‘mismatch’ between ‘people’s skills’ and ‘the requirements of business’ is just a way of keeping attention away from asking more basic questions about the structure of the economy, about the kind of society we are trying to create, about who benefits most under the current arrangements, and about the priorities that are implied in the common ways of approaching these questions. While it is certain that a greater ‘pool’ of more highly skilled potential employees – whose training has been paid for by government – would be very beneficial to business, it simply doesn’t follow that attempting to meet their needs for profitability should be the main priority for government policy regarding education and skills development.

Of course, knowledge and skills are important. The challenge is that there is no 'neutral' position from which we can determine which kinds of knowledge and skills are most important. To make a decision about what kinds of skills are important actually involves choosing between different values, or between different visions of the world we want. If we simply accept that people should be taught to be productive employees of businesses within a competitive economy, then we have already eliminated a whole range of questions about whether we must accept that a world of competing economic units is the best one, or even the only one possible. In other words, these are not simply 'technical' decisions about how best to improve the situation of young people, but political questions about what kind of society, and what kind of world, we are trying to build.

In our country we have many with skills that were used for anti-human purposes [under Apartheid]. Let's also not forget the poignant sentiment expressed by Haim G. Ginott, a concentration camp survivor who was also an educator:

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no person should witness. Gas chambers built by learned engineers. Children poisoned by educated physicians. Infants killed by trained nurses. Women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates.

So I am suspicious of education. My request is: help your students become more human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, or educated Eichmanns. Reading, writing, and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human.

Alternative ways to think about skills

One alternative way of thinking about skills, livelihoods and work is through the concept of ‘socially useful labour’. This way of thinking about the issues draws our focus back to the fact that there are many ways of making a contribution to society, and that we should not assume that contributing toward the profitability of a business is the only way, or the best way – or even necessarily a good way.¹¹

Many people have skills that are very useful and that can add value to the lives of the people around them: skills in childcare, in building or repairing things, in cooking or cleaning, in making music or telling stories, and countless other things besides. Many people already provide these services to each other on the basis of neighbourly exchange – in other words, they help each other when something is needed, and simply maintain an ‘informal’ sense about who has done what for whom, and who owes someone else a return favour. These are not necessarily skills that businesses can easily profit from, so these skills are not normally recognised or taken seriously within discussions of skills, employment and livelihood.

Those who favour a capitalist approach to the economy – and to social relations more generally – often say that such people as these should see themselves as ‘entrepreneurs’, and should create individual businesses that allow them to participate in the ‘formal’ economy. It is true that for many people this is almost the only way to be able to make a living. This doesn’t change the fact that there are other ways to arrange a society, and if we are serious about creating the best society for people, we should not simply accept the dominant ideas about how things should be done.

Unfortunately, there is rarely any discussion about using government resources to strengthen people’s abilities to act in these ways within their own contexts. Discussions about the use of government resources are almost always focused on how to encourage employment that will contribute to the profits of private businesses.

¹¹ For example, if we are working for a company that manufactures weapons, or cigarettes, or some other harmful products, there are very serious questions we may need to ask about the value of what we are doing.



Kliptown 2008, Daniel Lanteigne

What is the purpose of education?

Implicit in many of these discussions is the idea that the proper purpose of education is to prepare people to find jobs within a pre-defined system – a system that cannot be questioned or changed, but must simply be accepted in its basic structure and features. This reflects a vision of the world that is fundamentally pessimistic, and disempowering for the vast majority of people. Discussions of the purpose of education should not be seen as mainly focused on helping someone obtain employment within a system that exploits them, but should rather reflect the entire range of human needs, abilities and capacities, and should foster hope, dignity and self-determination.

The South African government itself has recognised the importance of taking this wider view of the purpose of education. In 2011, the National Planning Commission published the 'National Development Plan: Vision for 2030', which recognises education, training and skills as engines for development. More recently – and more importantly – the 'Green Paper for Post-School Education and Training', published in January 2012 states in its preface:

The government of South Africa has resolved to make reducing unemployment its priority concern, and to ensure that every Ministry and Department takes whatever action is possible to expand job opportunities and build sustainable livelihoods, and enable all South Africans to contribute to, participate in, and benefit from, that expansion. This must include interventions to ensure redress of the injustices of the apartheid past and the progressive introduction of free education for the poor up to undergraduate level....

It is important to emphasise that the focus on employment is not to the exclusion of all other development and transformational goals; quite the contrary – unemployment can only be reduced if the transformation agenda is taken forward with renewed vigour.

Such policy statements and positions provide potentially useful points of leverage for education activists – but that is all they provide. It is essential that people not become complacent in the face of such positions by assuming that government will simply act on them in ways that are favourable to poor and working people. Rather, it is up to people to conscientise and mobilise on the basis of the opportunity such statements provide for the enactment of progressive policy and action.

We should recognise that the formal labour market cannot provide jobs for everyone who deserves a livelihood, and we cannot see it as the only solution to the problems of poverty and material insecurity that so many people in South Africa face. We should keep in mind the difference between 'socially useful work' and 'work that is profitable for business' – and we should insist that public policy and resources are directed especially toward creating socially useful work.

– Enver Motala

If we do not insist on the crucial importance of the humanities and the arts, they will drop away, because they do not make money. They only do what is much more precious than that: make a world that is worth living in, people who are able to see other human beings as full people... and nations that are able to overcome fear and suspicion in favour of sympathetic and reasoned debate.

– Martha Nussbaum,
Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities

Case Studies and Examples

Many people who live in informal settlements, in townships, in the inner cities, demonstrate amazing courage, ingenuity and determination on a daily basis. Essentially all of them possess important skills for living that our public policy debates should not only keep in view, but should seek actively to affirm and build upon. Just as we asked above what kinds of skills are needed, and on what basis, we must be willing to ask what kinds of opportunities need to be created for people. Should we prioritise for creating private-sector jobs for profit, or should we rather look to create public-sector and community-based opportunities – whether formal jobs, apprenticeships, social grants, etc. – that meet local needs, and that help build local resilience in the face of widespread violence and insecurity?

Several examples are presented below that address local needs in innovative ways. Many of them also directly contribute toward addressing violence against women and children, food security, climate change impacts, and many other problems that far too many South Africans still face.

Bench Marks' Community Monitoring Project

communitymonitors.net/

Launched in 2001 by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Bench Marks Foundation is a non-profit, faith-based organisation that works with communities and church leaders to promote their active involvement in the monitoring of private corporations (and government) to ensure that they are acting in an accountable and socially responsible way.



Among its various tools and approaches, Bench Marks makes use of 'community mapping' as an empowerment and conscientisation tool: young people are encouraged to keep diaries, and to draw maps of their communities, identifying things that affect their lives: things that worry them, that make them angry, etc. In mining communities, for example, they are encouraged to record how the mines affect their lives. They are then encouraged to go talk to others in their community about what they have recorded, as a means to begin to externalise their concerns, create a shared understanding, build solidarity, and explore possible responses. In this way, the project uses mapping and keeping a diary as empowerment and conscientisation tools.

One possibility the project suggests is to pay young people directly to teach and coach others based on whatever skills and interests they already have: reading, playing football, etc. – thus further developing their own mentoring skills while transferring the skills and knowledge they have to others, and strengthening relationships within the community.

As project co-ordinator Bobby Marie explained at the workshop, the project has also shown that 'there isn't a skills problem': large numbers of young people have done some level of high school, and that provides an enormous amount of skill that can be built upon. What is essential, though, is making a public policy commitment to build upon the skills that people already have in order to help them become more effective in their own contexts, rather than trying to fit them into a system where they have almost no option but to perform alienating work to generate profits for wealthy shareholders.

Bench Marks Foundation's work reminds us that rather than merely trying to figure out how to encourage businesses to employ more people, we should be looking for ways to support young people in using the knowledge and skills they already possess to improve their communities, further strengthening their skills and building their confidence in the process. It is an approach that allows people to see that they already have the skills needed to understand their situation, and that they can begin to take control of their lives together.

The Community Literacy and Numeracy Group (CLING)

www.facebook.com/pages/Community-Literacy-and-Numeracy-Group-CLING/

The Community Literacy and Numeracy Group (CLING) is a participatory action-research project that aims to understand whether increased community involvement in schools could contribute to improved literacy



Volunteers of CLING, who have turned a shack into a community learning centre: (from left) Xoli Mthethwa, Gladys Posa, Tholakele Mbewe, Edith Mthimkhulu, Emily Dlamini, and Thembi Sefatsa. In front are Meshack Tladi and Sthembiso Nhlapo.

and numeracy levels amongst children in primary schools. The project has been undertaken in five communities across three provinces, over a period of 5 years, as part of the Education Policy Consortium's (EPC's) comprehensive research programme. The project was conceived as a response to concerns about dwindling community participation in the lives of public schools, specifically in urban and rural poor communities, and low levels of literacy and numeracy amongst children in primary schools.

Project activities are grounded in an understanding of literacy and numeracy as integral to participatory citizenship and the development of democracy, and a recognition that the struggle for literacy and numeracy requires agency and active participation. In each location, community activists and EPC researchers perform community mapping and draw on local knowledge in order to raise awareness of the importance of literacy, and to mobilise community participation. Initially, the project focused on literacy and numeracy in schools, but this focus eventually shifted toward community spaces, leading to the establishment of shack libraries, afterschool classes, reading clubs and opportunities for adult basic education and early childhood development. The Gauteng Department of Education has provided support in the form of a stipend for community facilitators.

While the project cannot claim to have made a measurable impact on literacy and numeracy levels amongst children in primary schools, findings do suggest that community participation in education is of utmost importance and should be given much greater attention. Community members have gained experience as producers of valuable knowledge, and an understanding of key structures and processes that determine quality of life. The project thus provides additional reason to insist that people in poor communities are capable of finding solutions to their problems, and that public policy should support them in using their knowledge, talents and skills to improve their lives. This will require policies that value community participation in education and that provide the resources necessary to strengthen that participation.



Itsoseng Women's Project

www.businesspages.co.za/category/itsoseng-women-s-project

Itsoseng Women's Project in Orange Farm was initiated in the early 1990s. At the time, Orange Farm was an informal settlement where people lived under extremely difficult conditions, with essentially no prospects for employment. The project was initiated as a response to chronic and deepening violence against women and children in the community, and to the endemic poverty contributing to that. The name 'Itsoseng' – which means 'Wake Up' – captures the spirit of this response.

As Itsoseng member Gladys Mokolo explained at the November workshop, a group of women chose to respond by building something together. They pooled whatever resources they had in order to create a community garden. As they worked together, the project began to provide both a source of food and income, and to attract additional women to join. As the organisation grew and the garden became more active, it became apparent that there was need for a safe space where members could leave their children while working in the garden. Responding to this need, they agreed to establish a crèche. Eventually, members began to look for a source of income during the winter season, when the garden was not productive. They agreed to begin a local recycling project, which would eventually become the main source of income for the group.

Despite a severe lack of services or support from government, as it grew, the project ran into bureaucratic hurdles when the City of Johannesburg chose to enforce bylaws that had been passed without consulting the community, and that would have prevented them from using even

those resources that were available: shacks to house crèches, land for gardening. After unsuccessful attempts to resolve the situation through 'proper' channels, the project was eventually compelled to simply occupy the unused land they needed.

Project activities provide members with opportunities to learn and grow even as they improve their lives and communities, and as they strengthen their ability to mobilise, organise and demand the support from government they deserve. For example, the state could provide training and an income to those running the crèche, intellectually stimulating toys for the children, additional land to expand the garden, and assistance in selling their products.

It should be emphasised that this is a spontaneous, community-initiated, self-organising activity. However, unlike the kind of individualistic, competitive orientation that is celebrated and perpetuated under the banner of 'entrepreneurialism', this is a collective undertaking in which all participants are involved in making decisions, and which is designed to benefit the community as a whole. It is also a powerful example of people taking control of their lives – an example of successful grass-roots resistance against a system that had pushed them aside, and then left them without even the most basic requirements for decent lives, nor any meaningful political recourse through 'official' channels.

Khulumani Support Group

www.khulumani.net/

Khulumani Support Group (KSG) was formed in 1995 as a voice on behalf of victims and survivors of the Apartheid regime. It was created both as an attempt at ensuring the pending 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' would serve to ensure that such violations never occur again, and to advocate for urgent government action toward addressing the wide range of profound societal needs that remained unmet. KSG not only advocates for recognition and compensation for its 60,000 members, but also works to advance the cause of a just society, and has become one of the leading 'self-help' organisations in South Africa for survivors of Apartheid.



<http://khulumanisvoices.wordpress.com>

In 2002, KSG launched a historic lawsuit against multi-national companies that assisted the Apartheid regime to execute its repressive activities through the sale of weapons, vehicles and other 'security'-related items.¹² KSG also supports consultations on issues of national development, including youth development and well-being, as well as a community journalism project aimed at 'recording stories that fall outside of the 'mainstream' media.

In 2010, members of KSG's Thokoza branch (East Rand) began a project to secure sustainable incomes through traditional beading work and making of HIV/AIDS ribbons. According to KSG member Nomarussia Bonase, the group is trying to encourage other KSG branches to pursue similar ideas – not to 'just to sit and wait for reparation while they can do things for themselves'.¹³

¹² Information on the group's historic lawsuit can be found at www.khulumani.net/...us-apartheid-case-'huge-for-law'.html

¹³ khulumanisvoices.wordpress.com/2012/07/02/khulumani-east-rand-beads-livelihood-project-2/

The 'One Million Climate Jobs' Campaign

www.climatejobs.org.za/

Climate change will exacerbate inequality and poverty in South Africa because it reduces access to food, water, energy and housing. For this reason, the 'One Million Climate Jobs' Campaign aims to mobilise South Africans around real solutions to slow down climate change and promote the protection and enhancement of human quality of life and the natural environment.

The campaign is an alliance of labour, social movements and other civil society organisations in South Africa that seeks to bring about a just transition to a low carbon economy – to combat unemployment while addressing the enormous and urgent danger of climate change. The campaign is part of a growing, global movement calling for national governments to create large numbers of public-sector jobs that can help bring about the changes in energy infrastructure, transportation, housing, agriculture and other areas that will be necessary in order to prevent catastrophic, out-of-control changes to the earth's climate and weather in the coming decades. The global campaign draws its main inspiration from ground-breaking research and analysis by historian, playwright and long-time anti-war and climate change activist Jonathan Neale, and especially his 2008 book, 'Stop Global Warming – Change the World'.

The campaign is based on three principles: ecological sustainability, social justice and state intervention. The South African campaign was launched in Durban during COP17, in November 2011. The campaign draws on extensive research conducted by many of the leading environmental activists and civil society organisations in the country, and proposes bold, appropriate, and well-considered solutions for how South Africa can immediately begin to make a just transition to a low carbon economy, while creating at least one million new jobs.¹⁴

¹⁴ Campaign research has identified more than three million new climate jobs that can be created; on this basis, the campaign is calling for government to directly create, or oversee the creation of, at least one million climate jobs at this time.

'Climate jobs' are jobs that: reduce the amount of greenhouse gasses we emit, to make sure that we prevent catastrophic climate change; build our capacity to adapt to the impacts of climate change (e.g. jobs that improve our food security); and, provide and secure vital services, especially water, energy and sanitation (this includes reducing wasteful over-consumption).



Conclusion

We have tried in this booklet to clarify some of the important issues that are often overlooked in discussions about education, training, livelihoods and employment. As we have seen, one of the most important distinctions we must keep in mind is the difference between creating formal 'employment' or 'jobs', on the one hand, and the wide range of ways in which we can address people's needs for livelihoods, on the other. As educator and activist John Samuel observed during his keynote address at the workshop on which this booklet is based, government has an obligation to improve the conditions of the poor. In doing so, it must place the poor at the centre of discussions around employment, skills and education. This also means that learners, educators and activists have an opportunity to influence government policy on these questions, and therefore to shape the education and training sector in South Africa, so that it is responsive to the needs of adult, young and child learners.

Returning to the main questions we asked at the beginning: What is our vision of the world we want? What is the role of education in helping to create that world? Of course, we can only really answer these questions through our shared struggles, but perhaps we can already see some guiding suggestions.

Rather than blindly supporting proposals that are designed to maximise profits for companies, we must challenge our leaders to think more creatively, and to look more seriously at alternative approaches that can create socially useful work, that put communities ahead of companies, and that meet the needs of our people for livelihoods.

Rather than providing additional funds to private corporations that are already sitting on mountains of cash, in hopes of convincing them to hire a few more young people, government should be supporting and expanding the kinds of community projects and campaigns that are already being implemented throughout the country, and that are already demonstrating the power of collective community action.

Rather than seeing the goal of education as primarily to train people to compete with each other for a limited number of jobs, let us see it as an opportunity to nurture informed, conscientised citizens who can enjoy fulfilled lives, and who have the skills and values to struggle together cooperatively, whether employed or unemployed towards creating a better future for all.