



National Youth Service,
Employability, Entrepreneurship
and Sustainable Livelihoods

National Youth Service Programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa:
Strengthening National Youth Service as a strategy for youth
employability, entrepreneurship and sustainable livelihoods

The Case of South Africa Executive Summary

11 November 2013

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Executive summary

Youth unemployment is an on-going challenge in South Africa. Almost a third (31.4 per cent) of all youth aged 15 to 24 years in South Africa – or 3.3 million of 10.4 million – are not employed or in further education and training (Statistics South Africa 2013). Initiatives to address youth unemployment and disengagement have therefore received a great deal of attention in South Africa. One such initiative is the National Youth Service (NYS) Programme, which aims to engage marginalised youth in community service while equipping them with the skills and experiential learning they need to access economic opportunities and make the transition to adulthood.

Given the high levels of youth unemployment in South Africa and in Sub-Saharan Africa more generally, the question can be asked: How and to what extent are NYS programmes and policies intentionally designed to create pathways for youth who participate in them to transition into employment, entrepreneurship and sustainable livelihoods?

The MasterCard Foundation commissioned Innovations in Civic Participation (ICP), in partnership with Volunteer and Service Enquiry Southern Africa (VOSESA), to conduct a study with this as the primary research question. This case profile is one of three case profiles aimed at providing insight into NYS programme design and implementation in Sub-Saharan Africa. The South African case profile is based on a desktop review of existing literature as well as 12 interviews with government, civil society and private sector actors, and three focus group discussions with current NYS participants and alumni.

Youth and work in South Africa

Youth and unemployment. Half (49.9 per cent) of all *economically active* youth aged 15 to 24 years are unemployed (Statistics South Africa 2013). A study by the World Bank (2012) found that the extent to which an individual's age contributes to inequality in employment status in South Africa is remarkably high when compared to other, similar middle-income countries, putting young people at a particular disadvantage when it comes to accessing work.

There are several contributing factors to these high levels of youth unemployment, including the quality of basic education in South Africa, the relatively low levels of skill amongst youth which does not match the demands of the labour market, and the inability of the economy to create sufficient employment opportunities.

Youth, entrepreneurship and other forms of livelihoods. Entrepreneurship is often cited as a solution to the challenge of youth unemployment. However it is argued that entrepreneurship should be driven by the identification of gaps and opportunities, rather than by necessity, which tends to be less sustainable (Mlatsheni and Leibbrandt 2011). Overall levels of entrepreneurial activity in South Africa are low, with only 5 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds and 9 per cent of 25 to 34-year-olds involved in early stage entrepreneurial activity, according to the 2012 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (Turton and Herrington 2012).

Given that young people in South Africa are far from homogenous, youth development initiatives such as youth service programmes should incorporate pathways to a broad range of opportunities that include employment, self-employment, entrepreneurship and other sustainable livelihood strategies.

Efforts to combat youth unemployment. The NYS Programme in South Africa is one of a range of youth-focused initiatives introduced by government as well as private sector and civil society players to address the challenge of youth unemployment. These initiatives have ranged from building knowledge, skills and experiential learning to providing opportunities for young people to enter the world of work. A unique aspect of the NYS is that through service it also aims to build social consciousness and active citizenship amongst young participants.

National Youth Service in South Africa

Youth service programmes in South Africa have evolved in different ways since the advent of democracy in 1994. The late 1990s saw the introduction of compulsory community service for health graduates. The NYS Programme has its roots in the early days of democracy, but was formally launched as a voluntary, government-led programme in 2004. Over the years the NYS Programme has functioned as an umbrella for a variety of youth service programmes run by government departments and by civil society organisations.

Policy framework. A policy framework is in place to support the NYS Programme, but there is no formalised legislation on this. The key policies supporting the NYS programmes include:

- the *Green Paper on National Youth Service* (1998)
- the draft *White Paper on National Youth Service* (1999)
- the *National Youth Service Policy Framework* (2003)
- the NYS Programme was endorsed in the *Youth Policy 2000* (1997) and the *National Youth Development Policy Framework (2002-2007)*
- the *National Youth Policy 2009-2014* and the draft *Integrated Youth Development Strategy* (2011) identify the NYS Programme as one of six priority intervention areas.

Programme aims and target groups. The NYS Programme in South Africa aims to provide opportunities for the “involvement of young people in activities which provide benefits to the community whilst developing the abilities of young people through service and learning” (National Youth Commission 2003:8). The programme is aligned with government priorities. Unlike a number of other African countries where the focus is on graduates, the South African NYS Programme (in practice) targets primarily unemployed and unskilled youth aged 18 to 35 years.

Programme design. The NYS Programme in South Africa has adopted a hybrid approach that incorporates a variety of programmes and projects implemented by government departments and civil society organisations. The NYS Programme is structured around three broad categories of service (Mphahle 2009, National Youth Commission 2009):

1. Category 1 programmes involve unemployed, out-of-school and unskilled young people in structured programmes that comprise a) accredited learning and skills development, b) community development (service), and c) exit opportunities.

2. Category 2 programmes involve high school learners and university students in community service activities while they study.
3. Category 3 activities involve youth in ad hoc community volunteer opportunities.

Category 1 programmes tend to be longer-term, structured programmes and are intentionally designed to provide pathways for participants to access economic opportunities, although the extent to which these are implemented in practice varies across programmes. Category 3 programmes, on the other hand, tend to be short in duration and may involve larger numbers of young people, but are limited in the extent to which skills development can take place.

In recent years NYS Programme activities has tended to focus on category 1 and 3 programmes, with service activities in the further and higher education sphere developing independently.

Institutional arrangements. A National Youth Service Unit (NYSU) was established to co-ordinate and manage the operationalisation and implementation of the NYS Programme through a broad range of government departments, municipalities and civil society organisations. This co-ordination role is now located in the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA), which is a public entity accountable to the Minister in the Presidency and to Parliament. Some interviewees argued that the current institutional arrangements and the lack of a substantial, dedicated budget for the NYS Programme limit the role and leverage of the NYSU. There was support for stronger co-ordination of the NYS Programme from several civil society interviewees, on the basis that this would result in greater consistency and more proactive support for those implementing NYS programmes.

Partnerships. The NYS Programme in South Africa was conceptualised as a hybrid model that would be implemented through a range of stakeholders. In practice the NYS Programme has been implemented primarily through government departments and municipalities. Concerns have been raised that the alignment of government departments' NYS programmes with their Expanded Public Works Programme initiatives has undermined the service component, so that NYS programmes tend to more closely resemble public employment programmes.

South Africa has a vibrant civil society and there are several active civil society organisations engaging young people in service programmes. However a relatively small number are registered with the NYSU and more could be done to broaden the scope and increase the involvement of civil society. The private sector has played an even more limited role in the NYS Programme thus far, despite the recognition of the role the sector could play in supporting exit opportunities for programme participants.

Programme financing. The NYSU does not have a large autonomous budget with which to fund NYS programmes. Instead the NYDA receives public funding from the National Treasury for activities associated with its key performance areas, of which the NYS is one. The NYDA funds a small number of category 1 and 3 NYS projects directly, but in most cases the government departments and the civil society organisations must draw on their own resources.

Measuring programme implementation and impact. The NYDA monitors the number of participants in NYS programmes in a financial year and compares this with the targets set for that year. In recent

years this monitoring has been confined to NYDA-funded NYS programmes only. There is no centralised monitoring of the number of participants (or other output or outcome indicators) across all programmes registered with the NYSU.

Similarly, there is no centralised system for evaluating NYS programmes. A broad-scale evaluation of the NYS Programme has been undertaken by the Public Service Commission of South Africa, but the results of the study are yet to be finalised. At present the research evidence for the impact of NYS programmes on participants in South Africa is scarce.

Engagement with alumni. Levels of engagement with the alumni of NYS programmes vary from programme to programme, with post-service support limited in most cases.

Challenges in promoting pathways for transition. A number of challenges were identified, both in the practical implementation of NYS programmes, and in achieving the desired employability and livelihood outcomes for youth. These include:

- There are difficulties in linking participants with meaningful service experiences and exit opportunities.
- NYS programmes vary widely in the extent to which they are proactive in creating exit opportunities and the level of success they achieve.
- There is a danger that the concern with addressing youth unemployment can lead to a narrow understanding and implementation of NYS programmes.
- Linking participants to meaningful exit opportunities is especially challenging in the current context of high unemployment and insufficient economic growth.
- At times participants have unrealistic expectations which must be addressed from the outset.
- Linking participants to accredited training can also pose challenges, particularly in under-resourced and remote areas.
- There is little post-service support, whether financial or in terms of networking, that assists young people to address obstacles that may prevent them from successfully accessing the economic opportunities that are available.
- In addition, employment tends to form the main focus of exit opportunities. Few programmes – with one or two exceptions – actively build entrepreneurial skills and there is little discussion of other potential livelihoods.

Several interviewees wished to see a stronger co-ordinating role across all NYSU-registered programmes.

Promising practices

Little rigorous research has been conducted on the impact of youth service programmes on the employability or livelihoods of young participants in South Africa, but a number of promising practices are emerging that warrant further discussion. These include the potential for youth service programmes to:

- provide opportunities for youth to develop leadership skills and build confidence
- increase young people's social capital and connectedness
- act as a 'bridging programme' to support transitions from schooling to the world of work

- provide career guidance and practical 'next steps' for young people with limited access to such resources
- support choice and diversity of options in the pathways open to young people
- improve education and skills levels
- develop viable and sustainable exit opportunities that take into account the broader context
- 'connect the dots' by linking young people more proactively to existing opportunities and creating more clearly defined pathways for youth
- provide post-service support
- potentially contribute to building an asset base that will enable young people to more easily take advantage of the exit opportunities.

The NYS Programme in South Africa and category 1-type programmes in particular have the potential to play a vital 'bridging' role in providing pathways for young people to access employment, and to a more limited extent, entrepreneurship and other livelihood opportunities. However, further rigorous monitoring and research is required to provide evidence of this impact.