

Public works

potential for job creation

by ROBERT MCCUTCHEON

Using employment intensive methods for the construction of public works would contribute to the achievement of several of government's socio-economic objectives.

Unemployment is one of South Africa's most pressing problems. There is also a widely acknowledged need for housing and infrastructure, both urban and rural. These problems are set within a low level of individual and community capacity in both technical and institutional terms. Properly constructed employment creation programmes based on employment intensive methods could be established to construct and maintain infrastructure.

During the 1970s and until quite recently, 'labour-intensive' was the phrase used in the literature to describe what I have referred to (see box) as 'employment-intensive'. A major problem with the phrase 'labour-intensive' is that decision makers tend to focus on 'labour' and its connotations of 'picks and shovels' and ignore the extent to which the success of this type of work depends upon appropriate policy, institution, suitability of project, quality and efficiency, organisation and training at site and managerial levels, including that required for proper contractor and sub-contractor development. Employment intensive infrastructure construction programmes must be treated as proper engineering with the requisite planning and management necessary for the construction and maintenance of good quality infrastructure.

It has been estimated that an annual investment of R20-R27 billion is required to redress the

backlog resulting from the ravages of apartheid. Current expenditure on civil engineering is of the order of R10 billion.

The additional expenditure that could sensibly be made for roads, water supply and sanitation and the use of conventional capital-intensive methods would generate employment on a *pro rata* basis; this would amount to 160 000-220 000 jobs depending upon the level of service specified.

By contrast, making allowances for the different levels of service and the different potential for using employment intensive methods for different categories of road, some 580 000-760 000 people could be employed. It must be stressed that

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these are the levels of employment which could be achieved using a relatively low level of employment intensive methods which would not compromise time, cost or quality.

Policies

All successful large-scale employment creation programmes have been directly linked to formal long-term, 'in-house' (departmental) training programmes.

The whole process – from planning through to design, contract documentation, tendering, and implementation – requires atten-

Employment intensive

Employment-intensive construction may be defined as the economically efficient employment of as great a proportion of labour as is technically feasible throughout the construction process (ideally, including the production of materials), to produce as high a standard of construction as demanded by the specification and allowed by the funding; employment-intensive construction results in the generation of a significant increase in employment opportunities per unit of expenditure. By 'significant' is meant 300% to 600% increases in employment generated per unit of expenditure.

tion. In this respect significant progress has been made in South Africa over the past ten years.

Using employment intensive methods for the construction of public works, it should be possible to contribute to the achievement of several of government's socio-economic objectives, namely employment creation, the development of individual skills and institutional capacity development, all of which will collectively contribute to the alleviation of poverty.

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