

Employment, empowerment, entrepreneurship

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With unemployment on the rise, there is much debate about the long-term potential of well-designed social employment programmes, such as the Social Employment Fund (SEF). Implementing partners strongly believe in a strategy that combines the goals of providing employment, while creating pathways to address social challenges.



Juanita Pardesi, CEO of Seriti Institute

We speak to Juanita Pardesi, CEO of Seriti Institute, one of the SEF implementing partners, about the programme and its impact.

Can you give us some background on Seriti?

Seriti is a development facilitation agency that works with communities and social partners to enhance their socioeconomic impact. We create work opportunities, help alleviate poverty and inequality, strengthen caregivers and work to nurture stronger, food secure, economically viable communities and township enterprises.

At Seriti we believe in people and their capacity to be drivers of change and progress, in pursuit of a society with more opportunities, building toward a better future.

What is a social employment programme such as SEF?

Programmes such as the SEF are designed to not only to create jobs but also to contribute to the upliftment of society. In my view, SEF is an example of a well-designed social employment programme that has the potential to be a game changer in the social development space. The role of NGOs, like Seriti, is to implement social employment programmes as they provide the participants required to fill jobs which, in turn, stimulates the economy.

How so?

The SEF programme uses an adaptive governance approach, using decentralised decision-making structures to manage shared resources. Like any effective employment programme, SEF recognises the value of human capital. And people and their circumstances change all the time. The SEF programme is administered and managed in an adaptive and involves regular check-ins, active participation from all stakeholders and a willingness to learn from the results. It's a constructive way to build a proof of concept.

'Proof of concept' – explain?

It means a social employment programme that is effective yet it can be changed in size or scale. There have been many social employment programmes – or public employment programmes – over the years. Some have worked, others haven't worked quite as well. If the focus is too short term, work readiness skills and employability options can be limited. An effective social employment programme should, by definition, provide people with enough work experience and skills, so they are equipped to find permanent jobs when they exit the programme, making way for others in need.

Does the SEF have this potential?

Absolutely, and there are few reasons that support this claim. The SEF is about so much more than job creation – it facilitates opportunities through civil society organisations already in operation with existing infrastructures and footprints.

On-the-job technical skills are provided in areas like greening, food security and nutrition (for example) for which participants earn a stipend. When they exit the programme, they can look for a job – or start a micro business – in the area in which they have work experience.

The SEF also provides leadership, mentorship, coaching, training and counselling skills. Participants are taught how to write a CV, prepare for an interview, effective communication and conflict resolution.

You mention paying a stipend, what is the difference between a grant and a stipend?

It's important to distinguish between a grant and a stipend. A grant is a payment made to someone with no expectation for anything in return. Whereas a stipend is paid to someone, in exchange for work done.

The model SEF uses provides much more than money. In addition to the obvious skills they learn, working provides dignity, confidence, pride and an opportunity to develop a healthy work ethic. This is especially important for young people entering the job market.

What else constitutes an effective social employment programme?

Collaboration and partnerships, getting the right partners on board, with an open line of communication, is critical to lay a solid foundation. It allows for the sharing of financial, technical and human resources which can help reduce the financial burden on a single organisation or the SEF, increasing the programme's chances of success and sustainability.

For example, we collaborate and partner with private companies, municipalities and tribal councils. They provide us with access to land, water and/or infrastructure support as well as understanding the local dynamics. SEF contributes labour and work experience.

So collaboration is key?

Yes, especially when resources are limited. Collaboration works when different partners have access to and can contribute different tools and expertise. In the SEF context, the government provides the funds to pay for the programme, the private sector and traditional authorities support the programme with additional resources. Seriti as the strategic implementation partner, has the experience and expertise of running similar programmes and the SEF participants know and understand the communities in which they operate.

This collective expertise can lead to more comprehensive programme design and implementation.

What about mentorship?

So many South Africans haven't had the opportunity to study, develop work readiness skills and participate in the economy. Mentorship allows the transfer of skills and knowledge in a controlled environment, allowing mentees to practice what they've learned. Simply put it's 'learning on the job'.

Final words

Social employment programmes are like a bridge that connects economic progress and social betterment. By addressing both unemployment and societal challenges, programmes such as the SEF have the potential to create a positive ripple effect that extends far beyond those directly involved, uplifting communities and stimulating local economies.

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