

'Women under 30 bear brunt of unemployment'

By Dominique Herman

There is a "gaping hole" in South Africa's social protection system and it is specifically those adults under 30 who are not eligible for grants that suffer the most from the country's rampant unemployment.

It is also this group - particularly the women in it - who are most susceptible to HIV, as no job means no money, which means no way of accessing health care or nutrition, according to the Treatment Action Campaign's Vuyiseka Dubula, who was speaking on day two of an unemployment crisis conference organised by Cape Town's Alternative Information and Development Centre.

"Unemployment paves the way for HIV to come. Those two viruses living in one body give birth to a generation of beggars," she said.

The Human Sciences Research Council's Jocelyn Vass said the unemployed had no money for transport to look for work.

The cost of job searching needed to be reduced - perhaps with transport concessions and community-subsidised childcare.

"How does one enable people to afford to go and look for jobs?" she asked.

A basic income grant would facilitate the development of local economies and help shift the country's focus from globalisation to localisation, said Margaret Legum, of the SA New Economics Network.

She added that the private sector could not, and would not, employ more people.

"There are still people in this country that won't accept that," she said.

Instead, the public sector should employ people on a large scale because it did not have to make a profit and, moreover, it could.

"The whole system is skewed and the mainstream economists haven't noticed," Legum said.

The National Labour and Economic Development Institute's Mandy Moussouris said local thinking that unemployment was a result of a skills mismatch was incorrect.

"The perception of skills as a panacea to all unemployment problems is a huge problem.

"It's about the economic climate. Capitalists don't want skills.

"They don't want workers," she said.

Economist Charles Meth, from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, said there was no intention on the part of the government to extend the grant system so that there was more comprehensive social protection.

Rather, there was the flawed thinking that economic growth would "do the trick" in eradicating poverty.

"It won't," he said.

University of Cape Town economist Anna McCord said World Bank figures demonstrated that even with six percent gross domestic product growth for the next ten years, unemployment among the low-skilled and unskilled was likely to remain a "chronic problem", and above 30 percent.

The Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) that targeted the working-age unemployed and was touted by government to be creating a million new jobs was also inaccurate, said McCord, who has been studying the effects of the EPWP on poverty and unemployment for the past four years.

In fact, she said, it created 200 000 short-term employment opportunities every year.

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