

#SONA2022 plan requires urgent action to tackle youth unemployment, dire poverty

Afrika Tikkun has welcomed government measures aimed at boosting youth employment and plans centred around strengthening small to medium enterprises (SMMES).



Onyi Nwaneri, CEO of Afrika Tikkun Services

In his State of the Nation Address (SONA) for 2022, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that the first two phases of the Presidential Employment Stimulus programmes, which launched in October 2020, have created 850,000 job opportunities. In addition, the Social Employment Fund is set to create a further 50,000 work opportunities using the capability of organisations beyond government in areas such as urban agriculture, early childhood development, public art, and tackling gender-based violence.

The plans highlighted in the address, including the cutting of red tape to enable growth in the small businesses and informal sector, are promising, says Onyi Nwaneri, CEO of Afrika Tikkun Services (ATS), a division of Afrika Tikkun specialising in recruitment, training, placement, and corporate transformation. “The apparent political intent to implement this policy direction shows there is consensus that as the sector with the most employment potential, small businesses must be the government’s first priority in its economic recovery plan, but dedicated and urgent action is necessary to ensure change,” she says.



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Unemployment

The first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic saw 20 million people, mostly youth, suddenly out of work and unable to go

out and seek employment.

“We agree with the president that fundamental changes are needed to revive economic growth, and we look forward to seeing how the government implements measures to give small and informal businesses the boost they desperately need. Small businesses generate the most jobs and provide opportunities for the poor to earn a living, yet they have suffered the most financial damage since the onset of the pandemic,” adds Nwaneri.

Nwaneri believes that among encouraging prospects mentioned in #SONA22 is the announcement that 10,000 unemployed Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) and university graduates will be given jobs by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).

“With more partnerships with civil society and the private sector, there is potential to make this a larger initiative, reaching more unemployed graduates,” says Nwaneri. The record unemployment numbers experienced last year were not just a product of the pandemic but a culmination of years of decline in investment into the economy. “We are pleased to learn that strengthening the private sector through various legislation and funding measures will be prioritised in the government’s economic recovery plan,” says Nwaneri.



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Critical skills gap

As highlighted by the president, the recently published list of 101 critical skills that foreigners wishing to work in South Africa can apply for has the secondary role of providing new insights into South Africa’s skills shortage. New definitions in the updated critical skills list will help inform academic and training institutions of professionals now in demand and enable them to adjust their programmes, according to Nwaneri.

The skills should also help inform academic and training institutions on how to adjust their offerings to suit the changing jobs market. This will help South African graduates compete for jobs in the global market and, more importantly, create a more streamlined jobs pipeline from school to employment.

“The investment into South Africa’s economy via SMMEs and the non-profit sector shows how vital these sectors are to the recovery and long-term sustainability of the economy. Small businesses are the backbone and future of youth employment,” agrees Alef Meulenber, CEO at Afrika Tikkun Foundation, the youth development non-profit division at Afrika Tikkun.



Alef Meulenberg, CEO at Afrika Tikkun Foundation

Meulenberg further welcomes the objective to revive the local economies of communities affected by political violence, lockdown regulations, and other issues emanating from the pandemic. He, however, believes that this objective can only be achieved through decisive collaborative efforts. Interventions for the benefit of township and rural economies must address immediate concerns and be sustainable for the long term. Sustainable recovery and development begin with protecting the most vulnerable while helping businesses get back on their feet.

Education

ATF says it wholeheartedly supports the government's introduction of a mechanism to address issues that afflict the delivery of school infrastructure. The mechanism will address the speed, financing and funding, quality of delivery, mass employment, and maintenance.

Despite receiving the biggest budget of all government departments, learner outcomes have stagnated at some levels and seen a stark decline in others, according to Meulenberg. The school drop-out rate brought on by the perils of the Covid-19 pandemic is alarming. "We believe the state of South Africa's schools is a clear reflection of the harsh realities of the communities in which they exist. Crime and vandalism in low-income areas contribute to the resource shortages faced by these schools, which create the domino effect of poor school outcomes," he adds.



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An Amnesty International Report highlights poor infrastructure in public schools, including sanitation and recent floods affecting several provinces across South Africa, disproportionately affecting the poor because of insufficient infrastructure. Coupled with massive learning losses suffered across South African public schools over the last two years, these issues demand urgent action geared towards complying with both its constitutional and international human rights obligations with respect to education.

"The implementation of these necessary and urgent reforms and interventions requires government, labour, business, and communities to work together and, as Ramaphosa says, to build a consensus on how this will be done. It is important that

this plan is underpinned by the will to act with urgency and determination so that no one is left behind,” concludes Meulenberg.

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