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LEVERAGING PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMMES FOR AN INCLUSIVE JUST TRANSITION: CONNECTING YOUTH TO THE GREEN ECONOMY THROUGH CITY-LED PARTNERSHIPS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Public employment programmes (PEPs) are increasingly recognised as tools for advancing a just transition by addressing both unemployment and environmental sustainability. Youth unemployment remains a pressing challenge globally, and South Africa is no exception. Youth unemployment has increased from 36.8% in 2014 to 45.5% in 2024, a dynamic that has been exacerbated by climate change and socio-economic shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The green economy offers potential for inclusive growth, and programmes like the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) provide temporary jobs and training, creating opportunities to engage youth in green projects. Drawing on key stakeholder interviews and document analysis, this paper examines how South African cities are incorporating youth into EPWP green economy initiatives. It finds that despite policy momentum, cities face challenges in attracting and retaining youth in EPWP initiatives due to a lack of career development pathways, limited alignment with existing skills and unaccredited training opportunities. The paper argues that city-led partnerships with stakeholders in the green economy can improve training quality, build professional pathways and enhance the long-term impact of EPWP on youth employment and empowerment in a just transition context.

KEY WORDS Just transition, green economy, public employment programmes, EPWP, youth unemployment, city-led partnerships.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Climate change is one of the most pressing global challenges of the 21st century, with far-reaching implications for the environment, human wellbeing and economic systems. The intensification of climate-related events such as droughts, floods and heatwaves does not only exacerbate existing environmental vulnerabilities but also deepens structural inequalities, disproportionately affecting marginalised groups and communities (ILO, 2018;2023). The global south has been hardest hit by these intersecting challenges, exposing the urgent need for policies that not only reduce carbon emissions but also promote inclusive economic recovery and social protection.

In this context, the just transition has gained prominence as a critical framework for navigating the shift to low-carbon, climate-resilient and inclusive societies (Ward, 2018; Culwick Fatti, 2021). It foregrounds the imperative of ensuring that climate action is socially inclusive and economically equitable. A just transition is grounded in principles of equity, redistribution and participation, ensuring that those vulnerable to climate and economic shocks are not left behind in the shift to a low-carbon economy (Swilling et al., 2015; Bhorat et al., 2024; TIPS, 2025).

The green economy has emerged as a critical pathway for advancing the just transition, offering the promise of environmentally sustainable growth, improved resource efficiency and inclusive job creation. However, realising this potential is not without challenges. The shift towards greener industries may lead to job losses in carbon-intensive sectors, particularly in the global south, where unemployment remains high and social protection systems are often weak. Scholars argue that such trade-offs are indicative of shortcomings in policy planning, targeted investment and institutional coordination. For the green economy to serve as an inclusive driver of socio-economic transformation, it must be underpinned by comprehensive training systems and strong labour

protections among other factors (Rosemberg, 2010; Hammer et al., 2016; ILO, 2023; 2024; Bhorat et al., 2024; Njokwe et al., 2025; TIPS, 2025). These elements are essential to ensuring that marginalised groups, especially youth, are equipped with the skills and support needed to participate meaningfully in emerging green sectors.

The South African youth unemployment figures were substantially high even before the COVID-19 pandemic, rising from 58.1% in Q4 of 2019 to 63.2% in Q4 of 2020 for the 15-24 age group. For individuals aged 25-34 years, unemployment increased from 35.6% to 41.2% during the same period (Stats SA, 2019; 2020). By Q4 of 2024, these rates decreased slightly to 59.6% and 39.4%, respectively (Stats SA, 2025). The global youth unemployment rate was 12% and 8.9% for Sub-Saharan Africa in 2024 (IOL, 2025), both well below the South African unemployment rate, which was recently recorded at 45.5% for ages 15- 34 (StatsSA, 2025). Several key structural factors are driving this crisis, including an outdated education system, rapidly evolving demands of the labour market, an increasing number of youth not in employment, education, or training (NEET), delayed labour market entry, entry into lower-quality jobs and prolonged or repeated spells of unemployment or inactivity (De Lannoy et al., 2018; ILO, 2018; 2022; Webb, 2021; Dawson, 2022).

Public employment programmes (PEPs) are increasingly recognised as tools for advancing a just transition and offering a practical mechanism to accelerate youth employment in the green economy. While existing literature acknowledges the potential of PEPs to address unemployment and climate adaptation (Rosemberg, 2010; ILO, 2018), gaps persist in understanding how cities of the global south are translating this into tangible results. This paper draws on desktop research and key stakeholder interviews to examine how seven metropolitan cities in South Africa are utilising the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) to support

an inclusive just transition by leveraging green economy initiatives to generate employment and skilling opportunities for the youth.

The key objectives of the paper are to assess the implementation of EPWP projects in South African cities and their integration with youth needs to create green job opportunities; identify the systemic barriers that hinder youth participation in city-led green projects; analyse the role of multi-stakeholder partnerships in delivering PEP initiatives and highlight existing opportunities within the green economy that South African cities, as well as other cities elsewhere, can leverage to enhance youth participation in PEPs while prioritising meaningful work opportunities, skills development, clear exit pathways and support mechanisms.

Following the introduction, the paper is organised into six sections. Section two outlines the research methods employed to collect and analyse the data. Section three presents a literature review that examines the intersection of youth unemployment, the green economy and PEPs to achieve an inclusive, just transition. Section four provides an overview of the South African just transition policy landscape. Section five examines the experiences of seven South African cities in implementing green economy projects, with specific attention to the extent of youth participation and inclusion in these initiatives. It also links EPWP projects to existing initiatives and identifies key actors within the green economy that cities can leverage and collaborate with to advance inclusive employment and training opportunities for youth. Section six presents the paper's conclusions and offers policy recommendations for strengthening the EPWP and broader PEPs as tools for a just and inclusive green transition.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This paper draws on findings from a broader research project commissioned by the South African Cities Network (SACN) in 2022 that explored ways in which the EPWP can be leveraged to empower the future workforce in South African cities, with a specific focus on youth and persons with disabilities in the digital and green economies. The study employed a mixed-methods approach comprising desktop research and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. Desktop research was used to gather and synthesise data from government reports, policy documents, academic literature and relevant organisational material. This method allowed for the identification of key actors providing training and employment opportunities in the green economy, mapping of youth participation in EPWP green economy initiatives and the analysis of national and international best practice case studies that have successfully facilitated youth participation in PEPs.

A range of EPWP documents, including business plans, implementation reports and internal assessments, were also analysed to gain insights into how the programme is operationalised across different cities in South Africa. In addition, international institutional sources, including the International Labour Organisation (ILO), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), were analysed to provide a credible foundation for the study and to contextualise global developments in green economy and PEPs initiatives. This was complemented by official statistics from Statistics South Africa (StatsSA), which were used to support evidence-based analysis of youth unemployment trends. Additionally, academic literature and policy reports were incorporated to enrich the analysis and ensure a comprehensive understanding of both global and local dynamics.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between May and June 2022 with EPWP officials in seven¹ South African cities with functioning EPWP units. The objectives of these interviews were to understand cities' experiences with implementing public employment projects, capacity building, opportunities and challenges with implementing green economy projects, and identifying stakeholders in the green economy space that can act as potential collaborators. In addition, stakeholders from national government departments such as the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure (DPWI), Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE), Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) and The Presidency were also interviewed. Interviews also included other actors such as the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) and the ILO. The interviews provided valuable insights into current PEP green economy projects implemented by cities in South Africa and internationally, the types of training and work opportunities available to youth and the partnerships and resources mobilised to support inclusive programme delivery. This mixed-methods approach enabled a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to youth participation in the green economy through PEP initiatives.

The interview transcripts and key documents were coded into thematic areas to identify recurring patterns that aligned with the research objectives. This thematic coding ensured that the data could be interpreted according to each research objective, thereby assisting in drawing out implications for the study.

3. ADDRESSING YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT THROUGH PEPS TO ACHIEVE AN INCLUSIVE, JUST TRANSITION IN THE GREEN ECONOMY

As the global climate crisis intensifies, there is growing recognition that responses must go beyond environmental sustainability to address deepening socio-economic inequalities (Swilling et al., 2015; Ward, 2018; Culwick Fatti, 2021; TIPS, 2025). The intersecting literature on youth unemployment, just transition, green economy and PEPs offers a multidimensional approach to respond to ecological breakdown and socio-economic precarity. This literature shapes emerging discourses around inclusive and equitable development in the context of the just transition, particularly in highly unequal societies such as South Africa.

3.1. Youth unemployment

Global trends reveal that youth unemployment rates remain disproportionately high compared to the adult working age group. A significant portion of youth are classified as NEET, reflecting systemic barriers to labour market entry. Furthermore, gender disparities persist, with 28.2% of young women falling into the NEET category compared to just 13.1% of young men (IOL, 2025). In sub-Saharan Africa, the main concern is not just the chronically high youth unemployment rates but the prevalence of precarious work among all working-age groups of working age. According to the ILO (2023), most of the working-age population is largely trapped in informal or insecure employment, earning well below the median wage.

In South Africa, youth remain systematically marginalised and vulnerable to various socio-economic challenges at both macro and micro levels (De Lannoy et al., 2018). This exclusion can be traced back to the apartheid era, and the post-democratic government has struggled to meaningfully address it (Arora et al.,

¹ Interviews were conducted with the officials from City of Johannesburg, City of Ekurhuleni, eThekweni, Buffalo City, Nelson Mandela Bay and City of Cape Town metropolitan municipalities and Msunduzi municipality.

2006; Public Servants Association, 2024; Mutsila, 2025). Meaningful economic growth path demands higher-level skill sets at a pace that the education sector has not been able to match. This has resulted in a mismatch between the skills required in the labour market and those possessed by youth. Compounding this issue are high rates of school dropouts before matriculating, poor quality basic education and insufficient development of basic literacy and numeracy skills, with a profound impact on labour market participation.

According to StatsSA (2025), youth unemployment has increased from 36.8% in 2014 to 45.5% in 2024 (Stats SA, 2025). A strong correlation between educational attainment and unemployment is notable, as the statistics show that unemployment is highest for youth without a matric (42.6%) and lowest for those with a graduate degree (3.1%) (StatsSA, 2025). However, in recent years, graduates are also finding it harder to secure employment. This reflects a further fracturing of existing structural challenges, such as shrinking labour absorption rates, an oversaturated labour market and other systemic barriers such as low skill sets and high NEET rates. This calls for transformative interventions, a coordinated multi-stakeholder approach while simultaneously enhancing access to good quality education, expanding vocational training and stimulating labour-intensive sectors (De Lannoy et al., 2018)

3.2. The just transition and the green economy as an avenue for job creation

The just transition agenda has gained increasing global relevance since the early 2000s, particularly as the urgency to combat climate change has intensified (Swilling et al., 2015; Ward, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic and climate-induced disasters have compounded existing vulnerabilities, particularly in cities of the global south. These disruptions highlight the need for a just transition that goes beyond

decarbonisation to incorporate inclusive economic recovery and social protection.

The just transition refers to the move away from fossil fuel dependence to more sustainable energy and production models, guided by principles of equity and redistribution (Culwick Fatti, 2021; Bhorat et al., 2024; TIPS, 2025). Scholars argue that environmental degradation tends to exacerbate poverty, inequality and unemployment, especially in already marginalised contexts. Therefore, climate policies must be “job literate” (Rosemberg, 2010: 129), anticipating and addressing the employment and social impacts of environmental reforms, particularly in fossil-dependent economies where the risk of exclusion and injustice is high (Swilling et al., 2015; Ward, 2018; Montmasson-Clair, 2019; TIPS, 2025).

The agenda advocates for the inclusion of workers and communities that are most at risk from the green transition (UNDP, 2018; ILO, 2023; 2024; TIPS, 2025). This involves creating decent green jobs, reskilling and upskilling the workforce and ensuring access to social protection. In countries with high unemployment and economic inequality, these measures are especially critical.

The green economy has gained attention as a high growth sector and a strategic pathway towards achieving the just transition (COSATU, 2011; Ge and Zhi, 2016; Bakhshi et al., 2017; ILO, 2018; 2023; 2024; Dladla, 2020; Harambee, 2025; Njokwe et al., 2025; TIPS, 2025). ILO (2023) defines the green economy as employment opportunities that contribute to environmental preservation or restoration, spanning both conventional sectors such as manufacturing and construction, as well as newer industries like renewable energy and energy efficiency.

Despite its promise, the green economy is not without contestation, particularly regarding its employment implications. Research points to a duality where green job creation can be accompanied by job displacement in carbon-intensive sectors

(Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2010; Ge and Zhi, 2016; Ward, 2018; ILO, 2023; 2024). These concerns raise the question of whether the green economy inherently promotes the just transition or simply shifts economic costs onto vulnerable workers and communities.

The shift towards low-carbon economies demands a significant transformation of skills ecosystems to prepare workers, particularly marginalised groups, for emerging opportunities. Targeted investment in skills development is critical for enabling equitable access to current and future green jobs (Hammer et al., 2016; Bakhshi et al., 2017; ILO, 2018; 2023; 2024; UNDP, 2018; Strietska-Illina et al., 2021; Essa and Philip, 2024; UNEP, 2025; TIPS, 2025). This includes vocational training, technical education and lifelong learning frameworks that reflect the dynamic demands of green sectors. Furthermore, responsive curricula and supportive policy environments can enhance participation in green skills programs. The ILO (2018: unpaginated) calls for “anticipatory skills strategies” that align training supply with current and future industry demands, particularly in sectors such as renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, waste management and green construction.

3.3. Using PEPs to achieve an inclusive just transition in the green economy

PEPs are increasingly recognised as tools to address unemployment and foster an inclusive just transition by integrating ecological restoration, community-based adaptation and green development. International agencies such as the ILO, UNEP and UNDP note that when well-designed, these programmes can facilitate structural change by creating green jobs, building community assets and supporting skills development. PEPs can offer state-led mechanism to generate employment while addressing climate change impacts through direct, often short-term employment and social protection to marginalised groups (McCord, 2012;

ILO, 2018; Dladla, 2020; SACN, 2022a; 2022b).

However, PEPs are seldom designed with climate objectives at their core, and national climate strategies often overlook the valuable role these programmes can play in supporting mitigation, adaptation and environmental conservation (Essa and Philip, 2024). When strategically coordinated, PEPs can be scaled up to align with climate priorities, enhance the effectiveness of climate action while simultaneously promoting social inclusion and protecting vulnerable communities.

PEPs have the potential to provide state-supported, purposeful job opportunities in communities experiencing wider socio-economic consequences of employment declines linked to the just transition (Essa and Philip, 2024). These initiatives can be designed to match the existing skills of the unemployed and those who have lost their jobs, helping to cushion both income disruption and the social and emotional strain associated with joblessness and insecurity.

Beyond South Africa, a range of PEPs have been implemented, each shaped by distinct national priorities, socio-economic contexts and institutional capacities. These models provide valuable insights that can inform South African initiatives. Examples of such initiatives include India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Rwanda's Vision 2020 *Umurenge* Programme (VUP) and Brazil's *Bolsa Verde* (Green Grant) programme.

Both India's MGNREGA and Rwanda's VUP incorporate green components, yet they differ significantly in scope and design. MGNREGA guarantees 100 days of unskilled manual labour per rural household annually, and while not originally a climate-focused initiative, it has increasingly supported ecologically beneficial activities such as drought proofing, water conservation and land regeneration (Reddy, Reddy and Bantilan, 2014; Das, 2016). It specifically

targets marginalised groups, including women and scheduled castes and tribes, and some states have started integrating skills development.

In contrast, Rwanda's VUP is more holistically embedded in the country's climate and development strategies, targeting the poorest households with public works projects that explicitly support climate resilience (Williams et al., 2020). It incorporates gender considerations and pays attention to the working conditions of participants, recognising that the just transition must go beyond job creation to address the quality and inclusivity of work. Unlike MGNREGA, VUP includes pathways for graduation from poverty through cash transfers and vocational training, offering participants skills for a competitive edge post-programme (Gahamanyi and Kettlewell, 2015).

Bolsa Verde in Brazil, while not a PEP in the traditional sense, offers a model that links social protection to environmental conservation through conditional cash transfers (Oxfam, 2020). It specifically targets rural communities living in environmentally sensitive areas and ties financial support to natural resources preservation. It differs from MGNREGA and VUP in that it does not involve direct employment or labour-based service provision but instead relies on incentivising environmental stewardship among vulnerable populations.

Despite their successes, these PEPs and others face several implementation challenges that limit their effectiveness in achieving the just transition. These include short-term funding cycles, limited integration with national green strategies, offering insufficient skills development or economic mobility, focusing on unskilled manual labour, corruption and political instability (McCord, 2012; Reddy, Reddy and Bantilan, 2014; Gahamanyi and Kettlewell, 2015; Das, 2016; Oxfam, 2020; Williams et al., 2020). Moreover, the lack of gender-sensitive and youth-responsive design in some of these programmes risks deepening labour market exclusions. To address these

challenges, some authors recommend the restructuring of PEPs from temporary safety nets into long-term platforms that support sustainable livelihoods and the development of green skills (McCord, 2012; ILO, 2021).

4. SOUTH AFRICA'S JUST TRANSITION POLICY LANDSCAPE

Since the early 2000s, South Africa has made important strides in developing laws and policies to support the just transition and green economy (see table 1 in Appendix). Despite this progress, a key limitation persists, which is the absence of a unified regulatory framework that consolidates the various dimensions of green economic development. Instead, a fragmented policy environment, comprising over 30 discrete policies, strategies, Acts and frameworks, has evolved over the past decade (Swilling et al., 2015; PAGE, 2017; Ward, 2018; DEFF, DTI&C and DSI, 2020; RSA, 2020; PCC, 2022; RSA, 2024; Department of Mineral Resources and Energy, 2025). This has impeded the emergence of a coherent green economy agenda (ILO, 2018), thereby limiting the potential for integrated, scalable PEPs at the city level.

Nonetheless, from the mid-2000s onward, South Africa's energy and industrial policy began to reflect a shift towards more sustainable development priorities. The introduction of instruments such as the Green Economy Inventory and Green Skills Frameworks from 2015 signalled the growing need to align workforce development with green transition imperatives. Given the country's dependence on natural resources, industrial policy - particularly through successive Industrial Policy Action Plans (IPAPs) - has been instrumental in steering industry towards sustainability and promoting the green economy agenda. These plans have promoted renewable energy, resource efficiency and circular economy principles. However, these efforts remain largely siloed and sector-specific, lacking integration into a cohesive national

or subnational economic strategy. A persistent contradiction is evident in the ongoing policy and financial support for fossil fuels, even as renewable energy receives increased attention (DEFF, DTI&C, DSI, 2020).

The Environmental Sector Skills Plan (ESSP), first introduced in 2010 and updated in 2020, provides a more direct entry point for localised, employment-driven interventions that cities can undertake. The plan specifically highlights the potential of the Environmental and Culture Sector within the EPWP. It puts forward three key recommendations relevant to city-led public employment schemes: 1) establish clear pathways from short-term public employment to sustainable formal employment; 2) align structured training with National Qualifications Framework (NQF) levels and 3) tailor skilling programmes to emerging green economy demands.

In the early 2020s, policy momentum shifted toward embedding justice and equity in the decarbonisation process. This shift was formally captured in the National Development Plan (NPC, 2012) and institutionalised through the establishment of the Presidential Climate Commission (PCC). South Africa emerged as one of the first countries to secure international commitments under the Just Energy Transition (JET) initiative. The JET Framework and accompanying Investment Plan offer a strategic basis for prioritising inclusive, climate-resilient investments, many of which have direct implications for city-level PEPs, particularly in areas such as local infrastructure, energy services and urban environmental management.

Recent legislative developments through the Climate Change Act (2024) (PCC, 2022) and the South African Renewable Energy Masterplan (SAREM), have further solidified the policy environment. The Climate Change Act introduces enforceable national climate targets, institutional accountability and legal grounding for the just transition. Meanwhile, SAREM lays out a

comprehensive industrial and skills development roadmap for renewable energy, positioning South Africa as a regional energy hub and potential manufacturer of clean technologies.

In this evolving policy landscape, cities are uniquely positioned to operationalise the green transition at the grassroots level. Key opportunities lie in leveraging EPWP frameworks to establish structured pathways into green employment, particularly through partnerships with local training institutions and private sector stakeholders. Aligning local skills development initiatives with national frameworks such as the ESSP and SAREM can promote coherence and support long-term employability. There is also potential to pilot just transition job creation initiatives in vulnerable communities, integrated with municipal climate adaptation and infrastructure plans. Additionally, cities can attract investment through the JET Investment Plan to scale up nature-based solutions, urban greening and decentralised energy projects, sectors well-suited to labour-intensive public employment. Additionally, collaboration with national agencies and international donors can support the design of inclusive programmes that simultaneously enhance urban resilience, reduce unemployment and address skills mismatches. By aligning with evolving policy priorities and leveraging national instruments, cities can serve as critical platforms for delivering equitable, employment-intensive components of South Africa's just transition.

5. SOUTH AFRICAN CITIES' EXPERIENCES OF IMPLEMENTING YOUTH-FOCUSED EPWP GREEN ECONOMY PROJECTS

5.1. EPWP

The South African EPWP is a PEP designed to offer short-term work and training opportunities for unemployed individuals, targeting women, youth and persons with disabilities (DPWI, 2009; Dladla, 2020; SACN, 2022a; 2022b).

Introduced in 2004, the programme operates across four main sectors, namely, infrastructure, environment and culture, social and non-state. The EPWP was intended to tackle unemployment by encouraging community-driven public works and promoting labour-intensive public spending. The programme also focuses on skills development and the delivery of essential public assets and services (DPWI, 2009; SACN, 2022a).

Over time, the EPWP has expanded the number of participants and improved the programme outcomes. The first phase (2004-2009) targeted the creation of one million work opportunities across the four sectors, with employment equity goals of 40% women, 30% youth and 2% persons with disabilities (DPWI, 2009). Outcomes of the programme were assessed based on whether participants exited the programme into employment, further education or training or self-employment. The second phase (2009-2014) set a goal of 4.5 million work opportunities and maintained the same demographic targets. At the end of this phase, over 4 million work opportunities were created and participants' average annual earnings were increased (DPWI, 2019).

In the third phase (2014-2019), targets for women were adjusted to 55%, 45% youth and 2% persons with disabilities. By the end of the phase, approximately 3.75 million work opportunities had been delivered against an initial benchmark of one million, representing 75% of the overall goal for the designated groups (DPWI, 2019). The fourth phase (2019-2024) raised the women participation target to 60%, while maintaining the youth and PWD targets (DPWI, 2019; SACN, 2022a).

Despite its notable achievements in providing short-term employment and tackling poverty, EPWP continues to face several structural and operational challenges. One persistent issue is the limited availability of accredited training, which undermines the programme's capacity to facilitate skills development and improve labour market outcomes.

This concern is echoed in the literature on PEPs, indicating that without meaningful investment in accredited training pathways, PEPs are unlikely to contribute substantially to long-term employment prospects (McCord, 2012; Reddy et al., 2014; Gahamanyi and Kettlewell, 2015; Das, 2016; Dladla, 2020; Williams et al., 2020; Essa and Phillip, 2024). Financial constraints at the municipal level further restrict the ability to integrate such training, resulting in limited human capital accumulation among participants.

In addition to training limitations, underperformance in meeting key demographic targets, particularly those related to youth, and under-expenditure of allocated budgets have been recurrent concerns (DPWI, 2019; SACN, 2022a). These shortcomings reflect broader governance and implementation challenges that have long been noted in the PEPs literature. McCord (2012) observes that fragmented coordination, capacity limitations at the local government level and inadequate monitoring systems often inhibit effective delivery and impact of programmes.

The above challenges were further compounded by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. As documented by the SACN (2022a; 2022b), several EPWP projects were suspended or delayed as resources and personnel were redirected toward pandemic-related public health functions. In sectors such as infrastructure, activities halted during the national lockdown in March 2020, resulting in a significant loss of income for participants. The pandemic not only exposed the fragility of the EPWP's implementation model but also reinforced the argument that PEPs must be better integrated with social protection systems to ensure continuity during emergencies (McCord, 2012; ILO, 2021; Essa and Phillip, 2024). Therefore, Phase IV (2019-2024) signalled a potential reorientation of the EPWP, placing greater emphasis on social protection and inclusion and exploring opportunities linked to emerging economic sectors such as the

green economy, with a particular focus on enhancing youth participation (DPWI, 2019).

5.2. Youth participation in EPWP green economy projects

South African cities are implementing several green economy projects through the EPWP. The EPWP Phase IV (2019-2024) prioritised several project typologies compatible with the green economy, such as sustainable land-based livelihoods, coastal management, waste management, parks and beautification and sustainable energy (SACN, 2022a; 2022b).

Phase IV of the programme set a youth participation target of 45%, and while many South African cities have reportedly met this benchmark, others continue to face significant challenges in attracting and retaining youth participants (DPWI, 2019; SACN, 2022a; 2022b). This difficulty is especially pronounced in green economy initiatives, which, despite their growing relevance, have struggled to appeal to youth. National department reviews and City assessments consistently highlight the lack of youth uptake as a critical barrier to the success of green-focused initiatives (SACN, 2022b; DPWI, 2019).

Interviews with key stakeholders, including EPWP officials, national departments, international organisations and youth development entities, echo these concerns, attributing the low participation rates to several factors. A primary issue is the limited and often reductive conceptualisation of the green economy among programme implementers. For many officials, green economy work is narrowly understood as involving the maintenance of parks, urban farming, the removal of alien vegetation, and the cleaning and general upkeep of public spaces. This framing reinforces a perception of green economy work as low-skilled, routine and primarily aesthetic, rather than as a strategic component of a broader economic transition or sustainable urban development pathway.

5.2.1. NATURE OF JOB OPPORTUNITIES

Although youth are identified as a key target group within the EPWP, attracting them to green economy initiatives remains a persistent challenge. One of the central issues lies in the nature of the employment opportunities offered. These roles are often short-term, low-paying and characterised by manual labour in environments perceived as physically demanding and lacking professional prestige. As one official explained, "the youth associate green economy projects with dirt and unfavourable working conditions with limited prospects for professionalisation" (EPWP official 2, personal communication, May 10, 2022). This perception is not unique to EPWP, but other studies elsewhere have shown that for young people, employment attractiveness is linked not only to immediate income but also to the perceived potential for skills development, upward mobility and long-term career advancement (Webb, 2021; Dawson, 2022; Essa and Phillip, 2024). Consequently, initiatives that are considered menial fail to resonate with youth aspirations, contributing to low participation in green economy initiatives.

This reflects broader critiques of the EPWP's design, which has traditionally focused on short-term, labour-intensive employment without adequately embedding pathways for professionalisation or skills upgrading (DPWI, 2019; SACN, 2022a; 2022b). While the green economy presents a strategic opportunity for inclusive development and environmental sustainability, its implementation within the EPWP often fails to move beyond conventional public works modalities, such as cleaning, park maintenance or invasive plant removal, thus narrowing its appeal among the youth.

A further complicating factor is the widespread but often misplaced expectation that participation in EPWP projects may lead to permanent employment within municipalities.

Although the programme clearly communicates its temporary nature, several instances of EPWP participants being absorbed into permanent roles have contributed to the belief that such transitions are common or likely. As one official stated, “we’ve seen participants on EPWP move from general workers to being fully absorbed as permanent employees in the city” (EPWP official 6, personal communication, May 4, 2022). These expectations create a potential source of disillusionment and undermine the programme’s credibility over time, particularly for youth desperate for long-term opportunities.

Moreover, the prevailing framing of public employment as unskilled work limits the programme’s capacity to respond to South Africa’s structural unemployment crisis, particularly among youth. Integrating more skilled roles into programme design could enhance the relevance and quality of outcomes, both in terms of service delivery and individual career development (Essa and Phillip, 2024). As noted in literature, PEPs can act as vehicles for inclusive green transitions, but only if they are underpinned by professional exposure and linkages to growth sectors of the economy among other factors (Reddy et al., 2014; Das, 2016; Dladla, 2020; Oxfam, 2020; Williams et al., 2020; ILO, 2021; UNEP, 2025). In this context, a reimagined EPWP that offers meaningful, skill-intensive green work could not only attract greater youth participation but also contribute to broader goals of economic transformation and environmental resilience.

5.2.2. RECRUITMENT DYNAMICS

Recruitment practices for the EPWP differ widely across municipalities, reflecting varying levels of institutional capacity, governance and political influence. In more structured contexts, municipalities have established formal mechanisms to promote fairness and transparency in the recruitment process. For instance, Nelson Mandela Bay operates a dedicated office that runs targeted programmes for vulnerable

groups, including youth. Similarly, the City of Cape Town has institutionalised its recruitment approach through a formal policy underpinned by a digital Jobseekers Database, which contains over 600,000 registered jobseekers. According to the municipality’s policy, EPWP projects must select participants from this database unless a valid justification is provided. The Jobseekers Database is used by the EPWP unit to select candidates according to project-specific criteria, enabling a more standardised, fairer and accountable selection process.

In contrast, several municipalities continue to grapple with significant recruitment challenges. Political interference remains a persistent issue. In Buffalo City for example, outgoing ward councillors reportedly inflated project numbers by enrolling participants without proper documentation shortly before the end of their terms. These unauthorised additions created serious administrative complications for the incoming council, which was unable to cancel existing contracts, thereby straining project oversight and operational management. Such cases highlight the vulnerability of PEPs to local political dynamics, especially in the absence of strong institutional safeguards (McCord, 2012; Reddy et al., 2014; Das, 2016).

In some municipalities, community-based recruitment mechanisms, such as lottery systems administered through ward structures have been adopted. These are intended to promote equitable access to employment opportunities by ensuring random selection among unemployed participants. While the principle of fairness underpins these approaches, their effectiveness depends heavily on the transparency and credibility of the local actors involved. Without adequate monitoring and accountability frameworks, even community-driven systems risk being compromised by informal or politically motivated practices.

5.2.3. TRAINING AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN GREEN ECONOMY PROJECTS

The stakeholders interviewed relayed that one of the critiques of the programme is its inability to provide participants with relevant and accredited training. Training provision within the EPWP is primarily supported by the National Skills Fund under the Department of Higher Education and Training, yet its implementation across South African cities remains uneven and underfunded (SACN, 2022a). In many municipalities, training tends to be linked to specific projects, delivered in a predominantly informal manner and remains unaccredited. As one official explained: “We did not train them except for when the training was done on site. So, in other words, they wouldn’t have any certification that would say they have acquired the expertise” (EPWP official 2, personal communication, May 10, 2022). The unaccredited nature of the training undermines participants’ ability to leverage their experience for future employment in the labour market.

EPWP training is often conducted by internal municipal staff or departmental officials, with content tailored to project-specific tasks. For instance, in green economy initiatives, this has included on-site training on how to identify and remove alien plants. While such training provides immediate functionality for project delivery, its nature limits recognition outside the EPWP, thereby constraining participants’ post-programme employment prospects. This pattern is consistent with findings in the literature that unaccredited and non-transferable training fails to significantly enhance labour market outcomes for PEP participants upon programme exit (McCord, 2012; Reddy et al., 2014; Das, 2016; Williams et al., 2020; ILO, 2021; Strietska-Ilina et al., 2021).

However, the training component within EPWP remains under debate. As highlighted by key informants from national departments and The Presidency, a growing body of evidence

questions the long-term efficacy of short-course, non-integrated training, especially in contexts of weak labour demand. One of the interviewees relayed that, “evidence has shown that employers in South Africa tend to value work experience more than certificates, particularly when the latter are obtained in low-intensity, short-term contexts.” (Official from The Presidency, personal communication, May 18, 2025). There is also concern that skills not applied soon after training are quickly lost, resulting in minimal long-term benefit for the participants.

These insights raise critical questions about the balance between investment in training and employment outcomes in PEPs. While accredited, high-quality training can expand labour market access, the literature cautions against meaningless training where such efforts may not translate into employment prospects (Reddy et al., 2014; Essa and Philip, 2024; Njokwe et al., 2025). This highlights the importance of integrating skilled workers and creating peer-to-peer learning environments on EPWP sites, as well as rethinking the assumption that training certificates alone can drive employability post programme in a stagnant labour market.

Another persistent challenge that limits training prospects is the constrained funding environment. Cities frequently report an inability to finance formal training, given the emphasis on maximising employment numbers with limited budgets. As one official noted: “We don’t have a budget for training on EPWP, as a municipality we are struggling to fund the training” (EPWP official 1, personal communication, May 6, 2022). These pressures intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to budget reallocations toward emergency services and disrupted planned training and employment activities (SACN, 2022a; 2022b).

Rapid rollout requirements often prioritise the disbursement of funds and employment generation over the integration of skills development. As

one official noted, “we had five months to deliver R12 billion worth of public employment, and there was no possibility of integrating effective training within that time frame” (EPWP official, personal communication, May 18, 2022). Such trade-offs raise important questions about the balance between immediate job creation and the strategic objectives of green economic transformation through accredited skills development. As highlighted in the literature, PEPs are most impactful when embedded in systems that foster continuous learning, cross-sectoral collaboration and institutional support beyond short-term employment and training cycles (McCord, 2012; Reddy et al., 2014; Das, 2016; Dladla, 2020; Williams et al., 2020).

Despite these constraints, some cities have developed more structured training approaches. In Nelson Mandela Bay, officials reported that all EPWP training providers are accredited, forming part of a deliberate exit strategy aimed at enhancing participants’ employability post-programme. Similarly, Cape Town has implemented a tiered training model aligned with participants’ educational levels. For those without Grade 12, foundational skills such as adult literacy, financial management and environmental basics are prioritised. Those with higher qualifications are offered more advanced modules, including personal leadership development and technical training in environmental management such as dune rehabilitation, under the Kader Asmal programme. Another example is the Buffalo City Municipality’s East London beachfront and eco-park redevelopment initiative. In this project, participants with a background in agriculture or horticulture received formal, structured training, while unskilled participants were enrolled in a six-month programme in environmental maintenance. This layered model exemplifies the kind of targeted and developmental approach to training that offers post-programme prospects for EPWP participants.

5.2.4. LIMITED INVOLVEMENT OF EPWP UNITS IN GREEN ECONOMY PROJECTS CONCEPTUALISATION

A key challenge in the implementation of EPWP green economy projects is the limited involvement of EPWP units in the initial conceptualisation and planning stages. Instead, line departments such as Economic Development and Infrastructure independently design projects and only engage the EPWP unit at a later stage to provide labour. This fragmented approach limits the ability of the EPWP units to influence project design in ways that align with their developmental objectives of enhancing youth participation. As one official explained, “Their [line departments] request is usually along the lines of: EPWP, you can support us by providing human capital for this project” (EPWP official 3, personal communication, May 5, 2022). Another official echoed this sentiment, noting that project plans are often finalised before EPWP is consulted: “We don’t really conceptualise the projects or get involved in that process. My role has been to assist in getting labour for the projects” (EPWP official 2, personal communication, May 10, 2022). This siloed model of implementation weakens integration between employment creation, prioritising marginalised groups and the developmental goals of green economy initiatives.

5.2.5. MULTI-STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS AND INSTITUTIONAL COORDINATION

EPWP green economy projects are often implemented through collaborations with sectoral line departments and, in some instances, national government departments. However, collaboration with the private sector remains limited and fragmented, with only a few cities managing to establish such partnerships. Where these partnerships exist, private sector involvement tends to be ad hoc, often taking the form of short-term financial support rather than long-term

institutional collaboration. For example, in eThekweni, the EPWP unit collaborated with Albaraka Bank to support a community garden project. The bank sponsored farming inputs, managed produce revenues through a community account and facilitated local reinvestment through its upliftment programme. While this partnership allowed for temporary employment and agricultural training of EPWP participants, the initiative was discontinued once the bank's funding lapsed. A key constraint is that many municipalities lack the administrative capacity and dedicated financial mechanisms to maintain cross-sectoral collaboration beyond the lifespan of specific projects (SACN, 2022a; 2022b).

Partnerships with higher education institutions have also been leveraged in some cities, although these relationships are often transactional rather than collaborative. In Cape Town, for instance, the city partnered with the University of Western Cape to deliver accredited training to EPWP participants. While this training added value, it remained limited in scale, and the university functioned more as a contracted service provider rather than a partner.

A more promising example of institutional innovation is from Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality (BCMM), where persistent challenges in urban waste management prompted a unique multi-stakeholder response. As documented in the BCMM Tourism Development Strategy, poor waste management has undermined the city's attractiveness to investors and visitors. In response, BCMM formalised a partnership through a Memorandum of Understanding with the Border-Kei Chamber of Business (BKCOB) and the Buffalo City Metropolitan Development Agency (BCMDA), establishing the Waste and Environmental Management Action Committee (WEMAC). This initiative exemplifies a co-governance model that brings together municipal departments, business associations and PEP to address environmental and economic priorities simultaneously.

One of WEMAC's flagship interventions, the Static Buy Back Centre (BBC) project under the Call2Action campaign, integrates EPWP participants with recycling facilities. Unlike earlier, short-lived pilot projects, this initiative achieved relative sustainability by aligning public employment with private sector investment and donor support. Since 2019, private partners have contributed over R9.8 million to BCMM's recycling sector, with organisations like Polyco providing additional funding and technical support. This multi-scalar model has not only diverted over 1,000 tons of recyclable waste from landfills but also stimulated local green entrepreneurship and formalised employment in the recycling value chain.

5.3. Opportunities for leveraging programmes and partnerships to enhance youth employment and skills development in the green economy

South African cities have access to a range of programmes and stakeholders that can be strategically mobilised to expand training and employment opportunities for youth within the green economy. The green economy presents substantial potential for job creation, particularly for young people, offering pathways that address both environmental sustainability and socio-economic inclusion (ILO, 2018; Presidential Climate Commission, 2022; Harambee, 2025). By engaging with relevant stakeholders and aligning with national frameworks and initiatives, municipalities can implement labour-intensive, localised initiatives that build foundational skills and foster long-term labour market integration.

Nationally, government-led initiatives such as the Presidential Employment Stimulus and programmes coordinated by the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs provide municipalities with opportunities to integrate community education and skills development into employment interventions. These initiatives span

enterprise and labour value chains and are adaptable to the EPWP model, enabling cities to deliver targeted youth employment projects. In addition, international examples provide valuable insights. For instance, a youth-focused project in Mali successfully employed digital tools to identify solid waste hotspots, demonstrating how technological innovation can enhance environmental management while engaging youth in innovative job opportunities (World Bank, 2021).

Within South Africa, partnerships with stakeholders such as the South African Renewable Energy Technology Centre (SARETEC) (2025), the Groen Sebenza Programme (SANBI, 2022), and Harambee (2025) have shown how co-creation between public, private and civil society actors can deliver structured training and work placement opportunities aligned with green economy goals.

South Africa's training and education system also plays a vital role in supporting youth participation in the green economy. Institutions such as Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges and universities are central to the development and delivery of both accredited and non-accredited training. SETAs have the mandate to facilitate sector-specific skills planning and work placements, which can be leveraged to ensure that green economy programmes offer market-relevant competencies.

Furthermore, funding instruments such as the National Treasury's Neighbourhood Development Partnership Grant offer municipalities a mechanism to finance green infrastructure and employment projects. Accessing and leveraging such funds requires alignment with integrated development planning and often benefits from partnerships with the private sector and non-governmental organisations. By utilising these financial and institutional resources in conjunction with the EPWP framework, cities can create more durable and developmental employment

pathways, especially for youth, within the evolving landscape of the green economy.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the implementation of the EPWP in South African cities, with a focus on youth participation in green economy initiatives. While the EPWP continues to provide short-term employment, its contribution to long-term labour market outcomes, particularly for youth, remains uneven. Evidence from city case studies points to persistent limitations in project design, nature of jobs, recruitment transparency and the provision of accredited training. These structural constraints, compounded by fiscal pressures and fragmented institutional arrangements, diminish the EPWP's developmental potential within the just transition and green economy contexts.

From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the need to reposition the EPWP as a more integrated employment and skills development platform. This includes involving EPWP units in the early stages of green project design, institutionalising partnerships with a range of stakeholders such as SETAs, TVETs and universities; and formalising collaboration with the private sector and civil society actors. Financing tools, like the Neighbourhood Development Partnership Grant, should be leveraged not only for infrastructure delivery but also to expand accredited, market-relevant training for green jobs. Without such systemic shifts, green economy projects risk reinforcing the low-skill, short-term character of traditional public works, limiting their transformative potential for youth.

Future research should examine the longitudinal impacts of youth participation in EPWP green economy projects and assess how different governance configurations affect outcomes across cities. Comparative studies of PEPs in other cities of the global south, especially those incorporating digital tools or climate finance, could enrich understandings of

how local governments mediate between employment and skills development imperative and environmental goals. As cities become central arenas for implementing just transitions, PEPs like the EPWP must evolve to serve as vehicles not only for short-term relief but for inclusive, future-oriented urban development that enhance youth participation.

7. APPENDIX

Table 1: SA's green economy policy evolution

Time frame	Strategy/ Plan/ Policy	Support to the green economy
2000- 2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Renewable energy strategy ▪ National energy efficiency strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reduce overall energy demand and introduce alternate renewable energy sources.
2006-2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ National Energy Act ▪ Industrial Policy Action Plan 2 ▪ Integrated Resource Plan ▪ Environmental Sector Skills Plan ▪ National Development Plan ▪ Green Economy Accord 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pave the way for diverse energy resources. ▪ Promote 'green' and energy saving industries. ▪ National energy plan including generation sources, reduced GHG, affordability. ▪ Comprehensive skills plan for the environmental sector. ▪ Highlights transition to a low-carbon economy. ▪ A national commitment to a green economy.
2012-2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Long term adaptation strategy ▪ Carbon Tax Policy Paper ▪ Green Economy Inventory ▪ Green Skills Framework 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Opens the door for GHG reduction through tax policy ▪ Scenarios and key responses to climate change. ▪ Sectoral and spatial list and taxonomy of green initiatives in SA. ▪ Skills required by the green economy in the future.
2018-2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Just Energy Transition (JET) Framework ▪ Just Energy Transition - Investment Plan (JET-IP) ▪ Integrated Resource Plan ▪ Carbon Tax Act ▪ Climate Change Act ▪ South African Renewable Energy Masterplan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Shared vision for shifting to an equitable, zero-carbon economy by 2050. ▪ Focuses on the investments needed, particularly in the energy sector, for the energy transition for the period - 2023-2027. ▪ The IRP defines the optimal mix for energy generation over the long term, guiding infrastructure investment factoring in energy security, cost, technologies, environmental sustainability and economic development. ▪ Primarily aims to incentivise behaviour by internalising environmental costs, ensuring major polluters in industry, energy and transport sectors pay for GHG emissions. ▪ The Act hardwires the just transition into SA's legal and policy frameworks toward a low-carbon, climate resilient economy. ▪ Guides how SA's renewable energy and storage industry should be built, and jobs should be created through green industrialisation.

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