

EPWP projects have potential

Within the infrastructure segment, labour-intensive construction is public policy, but its execution has been poor to date. However, a renewed focus could yield major socio-economic benefits and it begins with re-education and training. **By Robert McCutcheon***

Despite the relative failure of the Expanded Public Works Programme's (EPWP's) infrastructure sector roll-outs over the past 13 years, there have been some important developments that could provide a more meaningful implementation strategy going forward.

Key reasons for past failures have come about due to external and internal factors. The latter include the absence of a clear programme, plus errors during implementation.

The main external reason is the construction industry's traditional preference for fuel-powered heavy equipment, from conception to completion. Another is the general lack of understanding within the public sector authorities responsible for expenditure of the principles and potential of labour-intensive construction. Consequently, there is little or no appreciation of what has to be put in place to achieve the potential.

Internal roadblocks

The overarching obstacle internally is the route adopted for implementation,

which differs significantly from the successful model applied elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa.

Simply put, the process required to establish and implement a large-scale, long-term programme has not been considered by the EPWP implementers. With an overall allocation of more than R500 billion and an infrastructure sector expenditure of R129 billion, it should have been approached with the same seriousness and commitment given to megaprojects like the Medupi Power Station, the Lesotho Highlands Water Scheme or Gautrain. Instead, it was decided that delivery should be via small contractors, scattered throughout South Africa in over 10 000 independent projects.

Errors during implementation

The lack of effective training definitely impeded the process. This was compounded upfront by the absence of specific, integrated technical and managerial training. Therefore, a fundamental component of the process required for large-scale, long-term implementation was not set in place.

Elsewhere in Africa, large-scale, long-term programmes established historically ensured that the scale of construction was formally linked to, and dependent upon, the training of engineers and 'hands-on' single- and multisite supervisors – the latter being critical for the smooth running of the process.

It cannot be overstated that specific training is required for all concerned, at all levels: national, provincial and local authorities, engineers (site and design), as well as skilled site personnel.

Although both NQF5 and NQF7 training was carried out during South Africa's previous EPWP initiatives, it was ineffective given the lack of improvement in labour-intensity. It seems that the difficulties of actual implementation overcame any knowledge gained during the training. In addition, there was probably insufficient orientation of senior decision-makers. Plus, the overall emphasis on SME contractors did not achieve the anticipated results.

It is most disturbing that by the end of Phase II (March 2014), the EPWP had still not established a specific training college. However, in the original June 2004 Consolidated Programme Overview and Logical Framework, it was stated that a National Training Centre would be established as an intrinsic component of the overall outcomes.

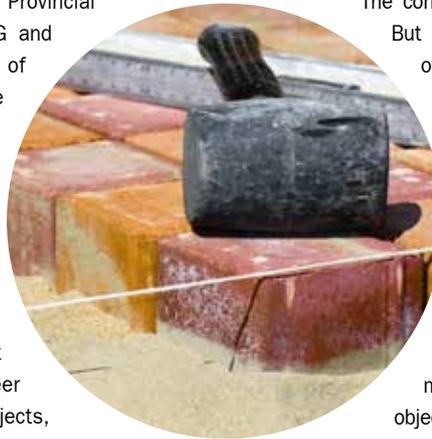
Extensive experience has proved that modern labour-intensive methods are applicable for a wide range of civil



“The EPWP Guidelines were too superficial to have any effect upon skills development and labour-intensity.”

construction operations, such as excavation, load, haul, unload and spread operations. However, the Division of Revenue’s mandatory conditions for expenditure of Provincial and Municipal Infrastructure Grant (PIG and MIG) funds on specific categories of infrastructure related to labour-intensive activities were simply ignored for low-volume roads, stormwater drainage, sidewalks and trenches.

Engineers did not prepare the appropriate designs, specifications and contract documentation required for modern labour-intensive construction. Additionally, the amount of time and effort required to re-engineer products and processes on specific projects, to incorporate labour-intensive techniques, was not taken into account by either engineers or policymakers. Unless this situation is corrected, it will impact on the EPWP’s future labour-intensive goals, which entered its third five-year phase in April 2014.



A fresh start

On a positive note, all the mechanisms are in place to put the EPWP’s infrastructure programmes back on track using tried and tested techniques developed over the past 30 years in Africa. Plus, these do not detract from government’s focus on social welfare support and upliftment. In fact, they help to cement and accelerate the process.

Across a wide range of building and infrastructure categories, there are now labour-intensive guidelines and background material in place for the formulation of design and contract documentation, including specifications and contract clauses. Training material and detailed courses have also been developed and approved, so there’s no need to reinvent the wheel.

Alongside the EPWP, opportunities for labour-intensive construction are also presented by the National Development Plan (NDP), which extends to 2030. Public employment programmes are included in the NDP, and the EPWP is mentioned as a prime example. The term ‘labour-intensive’ is included in the objectives of EPWP Phase III, thereby aligning it with legislation.

There is an EPWP Unit in the National Department of Public Works, together with a framework for implementation. The institution is staffed at national, provincial and local municipality levels, so the coverage opportunity is excellent.

Sanral is also preparing new specifications for labour-intensive construction, which is extremely important. Appropriate curricula for training have been established with accredited courses developed at NQF 2, 4, 5 and 7 levels.

So the upside is definitely there, since the budget allocations for Phase III of the EPWP are considerable, and we have the enabling policy and frameworks in place. Again, though, training is the critical component.

For large-scale, long-term implementation, we must establish linked training, construction and maintenance programmes. Where possible, this should include the establishment of in-house public sector capacity.

At project level and under current conditions, the consultant has to re-engineer product and process. The amount of time, effort and commitment required must not be underestimated, especially since the emphasis on using small contractors will continue to be a major focus.

The contractor must also fulfil the demands of the contract.

But this requires knowledge and experience on the part of the client, consultant and contractor to ensure that the design and contract documentation is correct.

The stipulations of the contract must also be enforced, just as they would in the conventional construction industry.

Today’s consulting engineers are expected to achieve a balance between infrastructure delivery and government’s socio-economic objectives. There needs to be a clear distinction between the two when it comes to labour-intensive versus conventional, mechanised-based construction as a transformation objective. A positive balance is definitely achievable. **35**

**Robert McCutcheon is a professor emeritus and honorary professor of the School of Civil and Environmental Engineering at the University of the Witwatersrand. He is also the head: Employment Creation and Development at MPA Consulting Civil and Structural Engineers.*



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