

Ghosts and graft in EPWP

Probe reveals jobs for pals and no-shows in programme meant for the very poorest

NOMPILO KUNENE

THE Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), which was designed to help make ends meet for those struggling financially, has been riddled with allegations of corruption and ghost workers.

The EPWP is a government initiative aimed at poverty alleviation by providing short- to medium-term work opportunities to the poor and unemployed.

It was first implemented in 2004 and is now in its fourth phase.

The programme started in April and will run until the end of March 2024. In this term, the programme aims to create five million work opportunities nationwide.

KwaZulu-Natal has a target of creating 643 268 work opportunities over a five-year period from 2019 to 2024.

Whether this target will be achieved is doubtful as there have been several allegations about irregularities within Msunduzi and other local municipalities' EPW programmes.

On July 9, during his budget speech at the KZN Legislature, Finance MEC Ravi Pillay raised concerns about there being ghost EPWP workers across the province.

He added the implementation criteria used by most municipalities were "irregular".

A source within the Msunduzi Municipality told *The Witness* that there were definitely ghost workers within the EPWP. Scores of individuals are alleged to be on the programme's payroll, year after year, but have never reported for duty.

There have also been rumours that the programme is being used to reward ANC volunteers for working on politicians' campaigns.

The source also said he had heard rumours about EPWP beneficiaries, who are usually hired for maintenance

work, working as domestic workers at municipal employees' homes or offices.

Ward 35 councillor Sandile Dlamini told *The Witness* that his role was to help the municipality identify people to hire. "Each ward has 20 EPWP beneficiaries and they are hired to do maintenance work in the ward," he said.

"We have a database of poverty-stricken families in our ward and we usually send that list to the municipality and they are the ones who select which people are hired."

Dlamini said one of his concerns is that, despite the EPWP employees being required to work at least three days a week, he rarely sees them working around the township.

"They normally have a supervisor who they report to, but my concern is that these supervisors also don't report for duty and the employees come and go as they please."

"I don't want to lie; some people do take their jobs seriously and do report for duty. It's just difficult because they also don't have the resources they need, such as plastic bags and grasscutters, to do their jobs properly."

"I think another problem is that the people employed on this programme are not scrutinised enough, hence we find people who only report for work when it pleases them," he added.

Dlamini said there were currently no new EPWP recruits working, although the contracts of the previous workers ended on June 30.

The EPWP employees do play a huge role in keeping their communities clean and the programme does help struggling people put food on their table, he added, but there remains a need to create something more sustainable for beneficiaries.

"At R120 a day, working only three days a week, is not enough, especially since a person is supposed to only be on the programme for 12 months."

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PROGRAMME NOT MEANT TO CREATE PERMANENT JOBS

PUBLIC Works Department spokesperson Mbulelo Baloyi told *The Witness* that from the department's R1,7 billion for this financial year, R4,7 million had been allocated to the EPWP integrated grant.

The money is distributed to municipalities across the province as they are responsible for implementing the programme.

"It must be emphasised that all provincial departments and municipalities in KwaZulu-Natal have been allocated the grant, which they use to augment their baseline budget."

"This budget is expected to be used strictly for job creation and five percent of it can be used for beefing up capacity to implement, manage and report on the programme," he said.

As part of co-ordination, Public Works offers technical support to all

participating public bodies, giving them advice on how to comply with EPWP requirements and expand job creation.

Baloyi said some of the challenges they face include concerns raised by many people, including councillors, about the manner in which recruitment and selection of participants is taking place.

"As a result, all public bodies have been encouraged to customise the national and provincial recruitment guidelines and take them to municipal councils for adoption and then make them known to everyone for implementation."

"A couple of municipalities, such as uKhahlamba and Ugu municipalities, have done their draft guidelines and they are currently awaiting council adoption. Amajuba and uThukela districts have already approved their re-

cruitment guidelines," Baloyi said.

He added that there was also a perception that the EPWP must employ people permanently and pay them according to the national minimum wage.

"The EPWP remains, [however] a social net programme that provides temporary relief to poor, unemployed and unskilled people. The programme was also exempted from paying the national minimum wage rate since it is regarded as a public employment programme, not meant to create permanent jobs," he said.

Addressing the issue of irregularities around the programme, Baloyi said investigations had taken place in eThekweni Municipality with steps being taken against officials involved in the transgressions. No other investigations have been made known to the department at this stage.

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