Social Employment Fund

Work for the common good

Practice Note

Beyond Employment Outcomes

Practitioner Perspectives on Pathways and Measuring Success in Public Employment Programmes

The Challenge

Public employment programmes (PEPs) are increasingly being asked to demonstrate their value in a constrained fiscal environment. As the government considers the role of these programmes and assesses their effectiveness, success is often measured by indicators such as the number of job opportunities created and the extent to which participants transition into formal employment.

While employment outcomes remain an important objective, there is growing recognition that these measures alone may not adequately capture the full value created by PEPs. This is particularly true in South Africa, where PEPs operate within a labour market characterised by persistently high unemployment, extremely high youth unemployment, slow economic growth, limited formal-sector job creation, increasing informality, and significant barriers to labour-market entry. In a labour market unable to absorb all job seekers, an important question arises: Is it reasonable to assess the success of PEPs primarily through formal employment outcomes when broader economic conditions limit job availability? This challenge invites a shift in perspective. Rather than measuring how many participants secured formal employment after leaving the programme, there is a need to query what value these programmes create in a context where jobs are scarce.

Emerging discussions within the partners of the Social Employment Fund (SEF) have highlighted the importance of moving beyond a narrow focus on ‘exit pathways’ and towards a broader understanding of ‘livelihood pathways’. This framing allows PEPs not to be viewed as standalone solutions to unemployment, but as one component of a broader livelihood journey through which participants transition. From building capabilities, accessing opportunities, strengthening resilience and pursuing a range of economic and social pathways. Practitioners implementing the SEF have increasingly observed that participant journeys are rarely linear and that programme outcomes extend beyond employment transitions alone. Participants use the opportunities created through the programme in different ways: accessing further education, establishing enterprises, strengthening existing livelihood activities, building networks, gaining confidence and contributing to their communities. Success cannot, therefore, be measured against a single outcome or pathway.

This practice note draws on the experiences and insights of Strategic Implementing Partners (SIPs) of the SEF to explore how the value and success of PEPs should be understood and measured more comprehensively. It argues for a shift from measuring employment outcomes towards understanding broader livelihood outcomes, recognising the capabilities, opportunities, community and economic value and social impact generated through participation.

Practitioner Experiences

Discussions during the SEF annual in-person workshop highlighted a growing consensus among SIPs: the value of PEPs cannot be fully understood through employment transitions alone or through the absorption of individuals into the formal labour market. Whilst supporting participants to access opportunities beyond programme participation remains important, practitioners in the SEF emphasise that participant journeys are non-linear, diverse and context-specific, shaped by a range of factors both within and beyond the programme. As a result, success cannot be measured through a single outcome.

Across diverse implementation contexts, four key insights emerged regarding how the success of PEPs should be understood and measured.

1. Success extends beyond formal employment outcomes

Participants experience a wide range of outcomes through programme participation, many of which fall outside traditional measures of employment success. While some participants may transition into formal employment, others pursue further education, establish small enterprises, strengthen existing livelihood activities, or access opportunities that may not have been possible without participation in the programme. Often, individuals participate in multiple livelihood activities and do not rely on a single pathway. Practitioners highlighted a number of pathways that emerge through and beyond programme participation. These include:

- Formal employment
- Self-employment and enterprise development
- Further education and training
- Digital skills and upskilling
- Strengthened livelihood and income diversification

Importantly, these pathways are not mutually exclusive. Participants often move between multiple pathways over time, combining various livelihood activities as they respond to changing circumstances and opportunities.

These experiences challenge the assumption that formal employment is the only meaningful indicator of success. Participants enter PEPs from different starting points and different personal, social and economic circumstances. Their pathways beyond participation are therefore diverse and often unfold over time. PEPs form one component of a broader livelihood journey through which individuals build assets and opportunities over time.

This points to a new measure of success: do PEPs help people expand their opportunities, strengthen their resilience and improve their ability to build sustainable livelihoods over time? This requires a broader understanding of what success means. One that recognises employment outcomes as important, while also accounting for capabilities developed, livelihoods strengthened, and public value created through participation.

Practitioners strongly advocate that measuring success solely throughout employment transitions risks overlooking important outcomes that contribute to longer-term livelihood security and economic participation.

2. Participation itself creates value

Participation in a form of work generates significant value in individuals. It contributes to the development of 'the self', building confidence and agency, strengthening self-belief, restoring dignity, and creating a sense of hope. These outcomes are difficult to quantify, yet practitioners consistently identify them as critical foundations for long-term livelihood building.

Practitioners also highlight the important role that participation plays in fostering social connection and belonging. Through meaningful work and contribution, participants develop a sense of being part of something much larger than themselves. Participation creates opportunities for individuals to feel connected as active citizens contributing to society.

The period of employment is often used by participants to stabilise their circumstances, develop new capabilities, build networks, gain work experience, and strengthen their ability to pursue future opportunities. The programme therefore creates value not only as a pathway to future outcomes, but also through the immediate developmental benefits it provides.

3. PEPs generate broader community and societal benefits

The value created through PEPs extends beyond individual participation. The SEF was designed as an investment in the common good, creating opportunities for participants while delivering benefits to communities, contributing to broader social value. Over three rounds of the SEF, the programme has contributed to strengthening communities, supporting local economies, building social capital, and addressing local challenges through community-based initiatives and programmes embedded within communities.

PEPs play an important role in stimulating local economic activity. In many communities where the SEF operates, participant stipends represent a significant source of income flowing into the area. This income is spent on local businesses and services, and as money circulates within communities, it sustains local economic activity. Emerging evidence from the SEF suggests that PEPs contribute to local economic activity.

These outcomes are often overlooked in traditional measurement frameworks, which tend to focus on individual employment outcomes. However, from a practitioner perspective, understanding programme success requires recognising both the value generated for participants and the broader societal value created through this work.

4. Civil society capability building

Participation in PEPs designed like the SEF to partner with civil society, supports organisational capacity building. Through the delivery of the SEF, SIPs have developed new capabilities, strengthened organisational systems, expanded partnerships, and built experience in managing large-scale employment initiatives within complex community contexts. Organisations have been able to strengthen their institutional capacity and develop capabilities that extend beyond the immediate requirements of programme delivery.

The value of learning and collaboration generated through implementation is particularly valuable. Spaces such as the Social Employment Network provide a platform through which SIPs are able to share knowledge, exchange best practices, build relationships and collectively respond to challenges.

Stronger civil society organisations are better positioned to respond to local needs, innovate in response to changing circumstances and contribute to broader development objectives. It is essential to recognise the capacity and capability building that takes place within implementing organisations, as these strengthened organisations form a critical part of the social infrastructure.

SEF IMPACT SNAPSHOT

Youth
65%

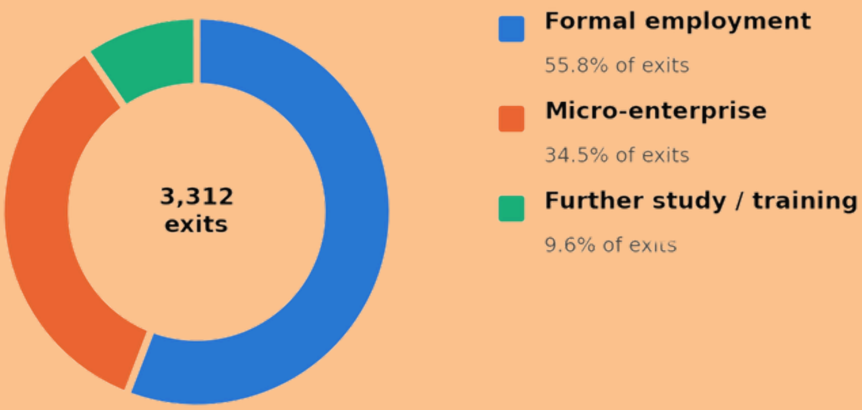
Participants reached
155,000+

Female
70%

Rural / peri-urban work
65%

WHERE PARTICIPANTS GO AFTER SEF

Based on 3,312 participant exits reported by 19 strategic implementing partners



Recommendations

1. Adopt a livelihood pathways approach to measuring success

Government should adopt a broader livelihood pathways approach that recognises the diversity of ways in which participants build economic security and resilience over time. This includes formal employment, self-employment, enterprise development, further education, expanded livelihood activities, and other forms of economic participation. These pathways are often interconnected, with individuals simultaneously engaging in multiple activities rather than relying on a single pathway.

There are numerous examples of participants using programme opportunities to strengthen existing livelihood activities, establish enterprises, pursue entrepreneurial ventures, or combine multiple income-generating activities. Emerging evidence from the SEF points to significant levels of self-employment and micro-enterprise development among participants. Evaluation frameworks should therefore explicitly recognise these pathways as positive outcomes rather than treating formal employment as the only desirable outcome.

2. Measure capabilities and social value alongside employment outcomes

Current monitoring and evaluation methods and systems are strong at measuring outputs and employment-related outcomes, but weak at capturing the societal capital generated through PEPs. PEPs should be assessed on the social, community, and economic value generated through the work undertaken. While certain outcomes may be less tangible, such as confidence, work-readiness, social capital, and hope, they are the foundations upon which long-term economic opportunities are built. Furthermore, PEPs create value beyond individual participants through contributions to communities, local institutions and the common good. Measurement frameworks should incorporate both participant development and broader social value creation.

3. Embed practitioner evidence into policy and programme design

SIPs possess a unique understanding of participant realities, community contexts and the factors that shape outcomes on the ground. These experiences offer valuable insight into how PEPs can create broader value, where barriers and challenges exist, and which interventions are most effective. Policymakers should create stronger mechanisms for incorporating such practitioner evidence into programme design, monitoring frameworks and broader public employment policy discussions. By drawing more systematically on implementation experience, government can develop more impact policies and measurement frameworks that are better aligned with the realities on the ground. Effective public employment policy should be informed not only by top-down evaluation, but also by bottom-up evidence emerging from implementation practice.

As South Africa continues to grapple with high unemployment, slow economic growth, and limited formal labour market opportunities, PEPs remain an important component of the country's response to economic exclusion and livelihood insecurity. At the same time, increasing pressure to demonstrate impact requires a more nuanced understanding of what success looks like within these programmes.

The experiences of SIPs of the SEF highlight that participant journeys are rarely linear and that programme outcomes extend beyond transitions into formal employment. Participants use the opportunities created through PEPs to build skills, strengthen capabilities, pursue further education, establish enterprises, expand livelihood activities, support their households, and contribute to their communities. These outcomes are not always reflected in traditional metrics, yet they represent meaningful forms of progress and value creation.

Employment outcomes matter. However, these outcomes alone are not sufficient to capture the full contribution of PEPs in a labour market that cannot absorb all work seekers. A broader approach to measuring success is needed. One that recognises PEPs as contributors to livelihoods, capabilities, community wellbeing, and social value. Such an approach would provide policymakers with a more accurate understanding of programme impact, while ensuring the realities on the ground continue to inform the evolution of public employment policy in South Africa.

This practice note was developed by Margo le Roux, Project Lead at the Economic Development Partnership for the Social Employment Network, based on practitioner insights of the Strategic Implementing Partners of the Social Employment Fund.





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