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The IRR's Blueprint for Growth :
Generating Jobs and Skills

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Executive Summary

Since its formation in June 2024, South Africa's Government of National Unity (GNU) has repeatedly stressed its commitment to boosting growth and expanding employment. Thus far, however, little progress has been made. In the first quarter of 2025, as Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) reports, South Africa's economy grew by an anaemic 0.1%, down from 0.4% in the fourth quarter of 2024.

As growth has diminished, joblessness has grown. The unemployment rate stood at 33.2% in the second quarter of 2025: up from 32.9% in the previous quarter – and 13 percentage points higher than the 20% rate evident in 1994.

To reduce the unemployment rate to less than 10% within ten years, South Africa needs to generate roughly 900,000 net new jobs a year. In the past two decades, however, South Africa has generated only some 240,000 net new jobs a year. Many of these jobs were created when the growth rate exceeded 3% of gross domestic product (GDP).

To help generate more jobs, the GNU must pinpoint the main barriers to job creation and then set about removing them. Prime among these obstacles are damaging labour laws, harmful state interventions in labour-intensive sectors, and poor skills and productivity.

The GNU should start rolling back damaging *labour laws* that price the unskilled out of the labour market and make warranted retrenchments and dismissals inordinately difficult to implement. Though these laws should be repealed, some interim reforms would help. For example, the GNU should allow all employers to pay entry-level employees at the same hourly rate as the state does under the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP). Second, it should permit jobless people to opt out of the protection of labour laws for several years while they build up work experience. Employers should also be allowed to dismiss or retrench in keeping with agreed notice periods in employment contracts.

Sectors with the capacity to absorb large numbers of unskilled workers should be freed from damaging state intervention and helped to expand. In *agriculture,* for example, production has doubled since 1994 and the sector has the capacity to grow by 15% to 30% if various constraints are overcome. These include unreliable electricity, poor logistics, high levels of crime, and increasing threats to water and ownership rights. Instead of trying to speed up redistribution to emergent farmers lacking skills and working capital, the GNU should rewrite the Expropriation Act of 2024 to bring it into line with the Constitution. It should also shift its key goal from increasing the number of hectares transferred to growing the ranks of successful commercial farmers of all races.

In the *mining sector,* the GNU should overcome persistent problems with electricity, logistics, and illegal mining and introduce an efficient cadastre system. It should also abandon harmful mining laws and charters, both present and proposed. Instead, it should copy Botswana's clear mining legislation, which has helped turn it into one of the most attractive mining jurisdictions in Africa.

The *tourism sector* has major growth potential, but has yet to recover in full from the damage done by prolonged Covid-19 lockdowns. Some important reforms, including a "trusted tour operator" visa scheme for overseas tourists from China and India, have already been introduced. Again, however, the GNU still needs to improve electricity supply and transport logistics, and reduce high levels of crime.

The *retail sector* has been growing strongly, with roughly 10,000 new stores specialising in fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) opened over the past five years. The vibrant *informal economy* could expand faster too if the GNU slashed red tape, provided better infrastructure (lockable storage facilities, for instance), improved policing, and reduced municipal dysfunction. To help fund repairs to failing municipal water, sanitation and electricity distribution services, it should also break long-standing habits of non-payment under which the total debt owed to municipalities has risen to close on R420bn.

In addition, the GNU must overcome the *skills shortage* by tackling poor education and training at all levels: from largely dysfunctional schools to failing Technical Vocational Education and Training *(TVET)* colleges, ineffective Sector Education and Training Authorities *(SETAs)* and overcrowded *universities* with generally abysmal throughput rates.

To get training back on track, the GNU must end excessive state intervention, along with the inept and often venal bureaucracies this has helped create. Instead of insisting on centralised and largely ineffective state provision, it should seek to increase efficiency by fostering competition among both public and private suppliers.

The GNU can achieve this shift by transferring much of the revenue now being badly spent by bureaucrats into tax-funded school and TVET vouchers for low-income families. These vouchers would enable millions of qualifying families to make their own decisions on what is best for them and so obtain the efficient schooling and TVET training of their choice.

Sound *schooling* will help ensure TVET students are better prepared. Under the voucher system, moreover, *TVET colleges* will have incentives to provide good teachers and appropriate course content to attract and retain the custom of students. Costly and wasteful *SETAs* should simply be scrapped, while university admission and funding rules must also be changed (as outlined below). This package of reforms will help TVET colleges, both public and private, become the preferred training choice of most matriculants wanting to acquire marketable skills.

As regards *universities,* the GNU should substantially raise entrance requirements and so help reduce high drop-out rates, especially in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects. It should also replace "free" education for low-income students with income-contingent loans (ICLs) backed by state guarantees, as the Heher commission recommended in 2017. In addition, it should increase annual state subsidies for universities, which will become more affordable for the fiscus once the ICL system is in place and the government is no longer funding the tuition fees and other costs of most students.

To help overcome the crippling skills shortage, many more *scarce skills must swiftly be imported.* The GNU should abandon existing and proposed state controls over what skills are permitted to come in under the critical skills list and other complex approval processes. Employer vetting of the skilled people they want to bring in should generally instead suffice.

In addition, the GNU should *stop using racial quotas* to exclude many of the scarce skills South Africa already has. All racial quotas must be scrapped as part of a vital shift from damaging BEE to race-neutral and effective EED.

A host of harmful policies – made worse by cadre deployment, corruption and ideological hostility to the private sector – have long obstructed growth, employment and skills development in South Africa. Over the past 30 years, the negative effects have become ever more apparent.

Fortunately, however, appropriate solutions have also become clearer. Further delay in implementing essential reforms can no longer be brooked: especially now that the African National Congress (ANC) has lost its majority and all right to keep monopolising key policy decisions.

Rather, the GNU must now take charge. In doing so, it should replace the ANC's fake transformation programme with policies that would truly transform the country for the better by triggering rapid growth, increasing skills and productivity – and helping to generate the millions of jobs required to reduce and in time resolve the unemployment crisis.

Still no remedy for low growth and high unemployment

High hopes that the June 2024 formation of a Government of National Unity (GNU) would usher in higher growth and lower unemployment are petering out. In the first quarter of 2025, as Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) reports, South Africa's economy grew by an anaemic 0.1%, down from 0.4% in the fourth quarter of 2024. Year-on-year, the economy grew by 0.8%. By contrast, the population expanded by 1.3% over the same period.[1]

Had it not been for a large boost from the agricultural sector – which expanded by 15.8% in response to good rains – the economy would have shrunk by 0.3%. The biggest drags on growth came from the mining sector, which contracted by 4.1%, and from manufacturing, which shrunk by 2%.[2]

Many economists have been revising their South African growth forecasts downwards. In June 2025 the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) projected GDP growth in 2025 at 1.3%. In the last week of May, a group of 26 economists provided a median forecast of 1.2%. Already, the GNU's earlier goal of pushing growth above the 3% level in 2025 is out of reach.[3]

As growth has diminished, so joblessness has grown. In the second quarter of 2025, the unemployment rate rose to 33.2%. This rate was almost half a percentage point higher than in the previous quarter. By contrast, the joblessness rate in 1994 was 20%.[4] On an expanded definition of unemployment, which includes people no longer actively seeking jobs, the joblessness rate has risen from 31.5% in 1994 to 42.9% in June 2025.[5]

To reduce the unemployment rate to less than 10% within ten years, South Africa needs to generate roughly 900,000 net new jobs a year. Only with job creation at this level will it be possible to find work for those already seeking jobs, plus new entrants to the labour market. Yet the country has generated only some 240,000 net new jobs a year over the past 20 years. Most of those jobs, moreover, were created in the years when economic growth rates averaged some 3% of GDP. [6]

This is not only a matter of South Africa's economic resilience or material wellbeing. It is also critical to the country's stability. High levels of unemployment add to the gulf between "insiders" and "outsiders". Those with jobs and the ability to accumulate assets, however slowly, are able to benefit from the opportunities provided by a modern society. Those excluded from employment and unable to find entry points into the economy find themselves trapped on the periphery, often unable to afford sufficient food or other essentials – and with little prospect of escaping their precarious situation. Their children, too, have little hope of upward mobility. This division disrupts the overall harmony – the social cohesion – that a plural society requires. At current levels of joblessness, South Africa confronts a situation which is ripe for societal conflict and poses a considerable risk to its democratic stability.

Overcoming the unemployment crisis is a moral, economic and political imperative for the country and the GNU. It is also what most South Africans want the most. In IRR opinion polls going all the way back to 2001, black (and most other) respondents have consistently identified joblessness as by far the most important problem they would like the government to overcome.[7]

To increase new jobs from their present levels to the necessary 900,000 a year, the GNU must pinpoint the main barriers to job creation and set about removing them with singular determination. Prime among these barriers are anaemic growth, damaging labour laws, limited potential in labour-intensive sectors, and poor skills and productivity.

The urgent need for rapid economic growth

The best way to generate millions more jobs is to trigger a rapid upsurge in economic growth. Only then will thriving businesses in every sector need many more employees to help them meet rising demand. Ideally, as the *IRR Growth Strategy* explains, the country requires a sustained annual economic growth rate of around 7% of GDP, which would see the economy double in size every ten years.[8] This level of growth cannot be attained immediately, but it can be reached over time as policy barriers, electricity shortages and other constraints are overcome.

By contrast with the 7% needed, South Africa's annual growth rate since 2008 has averaged around 1.3%. At the current pace it will take 54 years for the economy to double its current size. Meanwhile, with the growth rate often lower than the rate of population growth, GDP per capita has been stagnating since 2008. In the words of IRR CEO John Endres:[9]

> …[I]in 2008, South Africa's GDP per capita ($13,596) was at the same level as global GDP per capita ($13,659). [However], a growing gap started opening up as the world economy resumed its growth after the Global Financial Crisis, while South Africa's stagnated. Fifteen years later, in 2023, South Africa's GDP per capita was unchanged ($13,690), while global GDP per capita had risen by 34% to $20,671.

In 2024 GDP growth in South Africa came in at a meagre 0.6%, well below the population growth rate of some 1.3%.[10] Growth of a such a paltry kind makes all South Africans poorer on average with every passing year. It reduces consumer demand, inhibits fixed investment, and makes it difficult for businesses to expand or take on more staff. It also leaves 28.3 million South Africans – almost half the population – heavily dependent on tax-funded social grants. Already, moreover, the number of grant recipients is four times higher than the number of individuals (roughly 5.8 million) earning enough to pay personal income tax. In time, this imbalance will make it increasingly difficult for a heavily debt-burdened fiscus to sustain its monthly payments to the poor.[11]

Rapid economic growth, thus, is vital to any upsurge in employment. It is also urgently needed to increase tax revenues, and so help maintain the social grants and wider social wage (free education, health care, housing and the like) on which the poor and jobless largely depend – and which have long helped to maintain the country's social cohesion.

The damaging impact of coercive labour laws

An unusually high national minimum wage

The National Minimum Wage Act of 2018 was brought into force in 2019. The national minimum wage (NMW) was initially set at R20 an hour or roughly R3,360 a month (assuming 21 working days of eight hours each in most months). At that time, lower amounts were permitted for farm workers (R18 an hour), domestic workers (R15 an hour) and people provided with "temporary employment opportunities" under the state's Expanded Public Works Programme (R11 an hour).[12]

By March 2025, the special dispensation for farm and domestic workers had long ended and the NMW had risen by some 40% to R28.79 an hour or R4,840 a month for most employees. Only the individuals working temporarily for the state on public works programmes continued to receive considerably less, at R15.83 an hour.[13]

Many nations set the NMW at between 7% and 55% of the median wage.[14] In South Africa, by contrast, the NMW in 2023 already amounted to 76% of the median wage, which is exceptionally high.[15] This helps explain why an estimated 430,000 jobs have been destroyed since the NMW came into effect in 2019.[16] This estimate may also be too low. About 5.4 million people earn less than the NMW,[17] which makes their jobs illegal and their employers vulnerable to significant penalties if they are found out. The risk of detection may be increasing too. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) has complained that 45% of employers are failing to pay the NMW, while the minister of employment and labour, Ms Nomakhosazana Meth, plans to appoint 20,000 more labour inspectors over the next two years to help clamp down on unlawful conduct.[18]

The NMW has thus been set at levels that are costing thousands of jobs. It is also preventing many unskilled and inexperienced people from finding work at all, as their labour is not worth what the government compels employers to pay. Many jobless South Africans would probably prefer to work for less than the NMW than have no earnings at all – but the law prevents voluntary agreements of this kind. It has become a major barrier to job creation for the millions of South Africans who have left school in the last 30 years still functionally illiterate and innumerate – and often without even a matric.[19]

Coercive bargaining council agreements

The Labour Relations Act (LRA) of 1995 includes a system of "blanket coverage", under which bargaining council agreements on wages and working conditions – generally reached in negotiations between big businesses and big unions – are extended by ministerial regulation to all employers within a given sector. These wage agreements then become binding on small and medium enterprises (SMEs) within the sector which have never consented to them, often cannot afford them, and may be forced into retrenchments or even liquidation as a result.[20]

The impact on entry level wages has been considerable and the consequences severe. In the metals & engineering (M&E) sector, for instance, entry-level wages (including employee benefits) rose to some R13,000 a month in 2024, which many smaller businesses could not afford. As journalist Julian Avery reports, even larger employers in the industry acknowledged that "the relentless push for higher entry-level wages,...inflated by decades of collective bargaining, ha[d] in effect priced out many entry-level workers, rendering them unemployable unless companies [obtained] exemptions from the collective agreement".[21] Seeking exemptions was also "a cumbersome and inefficient process". It was also only a temporary solution. As Mr Avery points out, struggling smaller firms know that "the moment [they become] profitable, [they will be] forced into a wage dispensation that will eventually destroy [them]".[22]

Rules raising the costs of dismissals

The LRA also makes it difficult to dismiss poorly performing employees, for all dismissals are automatically deemed unfair unless employers can prove they were carried out for fair reasons and following fair procedures. Dismissed employees can easily claim reinstatement and/or significant damages from employers via the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation, and Arbitration (CCMA) established under the LRA. Employers are thus constantly at risk of being dragged before the CCMA on grounds that may be spurious but nevertheless take significant time, effort, and money to refute.[23]

The CCMA has long had an enormous workload. In 2023/24 alone, for example, close on 187,000 disputes were referred to it, roughly half of which involved dismissals.[24] Moreover, the decisions of CCMA arbitrators are often flawed but cannot easily be set aside on review. As law firm Cliffe Dekker Hofmeyr explained in 2023: "The test is not that the arbitrator came to an incorrect decision [as] this is the basis for an appeal. The test requires that the arbitrator's decision must be [one] which no reasonable decision maker could reach on all the material that was before them." Since that is hard to prove, many flawed CCMA decisions remain unchallenged.[25]

The Labour Court responsible for dealing with reviews is also over-burdened. In 2023 the judge president of the court, Judge Basheer Wagley, noted that the jurisdiction of the CCMA had been extended (by the introduction of the NMW, for example), but the Labour Court's resources had not increased. Since there were "only 14 labour court judges for the whole of South Africa", judgments had to be written on weekends or during recess. In addition, the labour court in Braamfontein had only six court rooms but was "dealing with a caseload of 4,000".[26] Dismissals were increasing too because of the economic malaise – and Judge Wagley questioned whether "perhaps, the time had come to reconsider the Labour Relations Act (LRA)".[27]

Necessary reforms to labour legislation

The millions more jobs so urgently needed are unlikely to be generated without major reforms to damaging labour laws. Both the National Minimum Wage Act and the LRA rules for the extension of bargaining council agreements need to be repealed altogether, so that they no longer price the unskilled and inexperienced out of the labour market. Since many jobless people would prefer to work for less than unrealistic NMW or bargaining council wage rates, their preferences should be respected.

At the very least, three meaningful exemptions from NMW and bargaining council rules should be allowed. First, all employers should be permitted to take a leaf out of the government's book and pay entry-level employees at the same hourly rate (R15.83) as the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) provides. Second, the government should allow people – and particularly the unemployed – to opt out of the protection of these rules for two to three years, while they build up work experience and increase their potential value to employers.

Third, the 12 special economic zones (SEZs) the government has established at a cost of some R25bn should be permitted to exempt investors from these rules. As the Centre for Enterprise and Development (CDE) has pointed out, "SEZs offer a chance to try different approaches to economic policy because they are, by definition, places where different rules apply." At present, however, the tax and other concessions that SEZs offer are too limited to attract much investment (which is why they have brought in only R31bn and created a mere 27,000 jobs).[28] More meaningful SEZ exemptions should thus be introduced – and exempting employers in SEZs from NMW and bargaining council rules would be a good start.

Rules regarding dismissals must also be reformed. Greater flexibility in the hiring and firing process is vital, as employers must be able to insist on sound performance and swiftly adjust to peaks and valleys in demand. Employers will thus hire freely only if they can dismiss freely too. The presumption that dismissals are unfair unless the employer can prove otherwise should be removed. Instead, employees alleging unfair discrimination should bear the burden of proving this. In addition, employers should be able to dismiss workers under the agreed notice periods included in their employment contracts.

Expanding labour-intensive sectors

The GNU should also take steps to expand three sectors of the economy that have long employed large numbers of unskilled people. These are agriculture, mining, and tourism. All have the further advantage of being tradeable sectors with the capacity to generate export earnings.

Agriculture

Agricultural production has doubled since 1994, with livestock, horticulture and field crops all growing strongly over this period. [29] According to agricultural economist Wandile Sihlobo, the country's agricultural exports reached a record level of $13.2 billion in 2023, making South Africa the 32nd largest agricultural exporter in the world.[30]

The agricultural sector nevertheless contracted by 8% in 2024, partly because of bad weather and foot-and-mouth disease.[31] Other damaging factors include dysfunctional municipalities, "poor road infrastructure, stock theft and port inefficiencies", says Mr Sihlobo.[32] Employment declined too, decreasing from 956,000 in September 2023 to 930,000 in March 2025.[33]

The sector could still grow by 15% to 30%[34] if various constraints can be overcome. These include electricity and water shortages, poor transport logistics (roads, ports and rail), and growing risks to water use[35] and other property rights under the Expropriation Act of 2024 (the Act), which authorises land expropriation for "nil" or inadequate compensation.

The Act was gazetted in January 2025 but has yet to be made operative. Though it applies to property of all kinds, the ANC has repeatedly claimed that its main purpose is to speed up land reform. However, between 50% and 90% of the land acquired for this purpose since 1994 has subsequently fallen out of production, largely because beneficiaries have limited experience and working capital. Unless these problems are first resolved, using the Expropriation Act to speed up land transfers will simply result in more "assets dying in the hands of the poor", as Thozi Ngwenya, the then director general of land affairs, warned in 2007.[36]

There is also little reason to expropriate more commercial farms when the government has already bought some 2.5 million hectares of land which it has yet to redistribute. Most of that land is also "under-utilised", says Mr Sihlobo, because it has "never been released to beneficiaries with [the] title deeds or long-term tradable leases" needed to borrow working capital.[37]

The GNU must overcome all these constraints if the agriculture sector is to realise its full potential. It should use privatisation or efficient public-private partnerships to cure electricity and logistics problems. It should replace cadre deployment with merit-based appointments in the public service, municipalities and state-owned enterprises such as Eskom. It should also adopt race-neutral empowerment policies in place of damaging BEE rules that enrich a narrow black elite and harm the black majority.[38]

In addition, the Expropriation Act – which conflicts with the Bill of Rights in many ways – must be comprehensively rewritten to increase the compensation payable and otherwise bring it into line with the Constitution. This is also one of the reforms the Trump administration in the United States requires to normalise relations and avoid the continuation from 7 August 2025 of 30% tariffs on agricultural (and other) imports from South Africa.[39] If tariffs of this magnitude are indeed maintained, warns Lesetja Kganyago, governor of the South African Reserve Bank, 100,000 jobs in South Africa would be at risk,[40] both in the agricultural sector and elsewhere.

The GNU should also shift its focus regarding land reform. Instead on speeding up the transfer of land likely soon to fall out of production, its main objective should be to expand the number of successful commercial farmers of all races. Towards this end, the GNU should sell the state's 2.5 million hectares of land to emergent commercial farmers on favourable terms. It should also help them to obtain all the other inputs needed for success: from working capital and skills to labour, energy, infrastructure and markets. Unlike current land reform policies, these interventions would be effective in increasing production, expanding agricultural jobs, and meeting the food needs of growing populations in South Africa and elsewhere on the continent.

Mining

The mining industry has long been the bedrock of South Africa's industrialised economy and still contributes some 8% to GDP.[41] In the first quarter of 2025, it provided some 431,000 direct jobs[42] and supported many indirect jobs as well. Mining jobs have nevertheless decreased by 37% from the 690,000 people employed in 1994. Some 13,000 people were retrenched in 2024[43] because of depressed prices for coal and platinum group metals, coupled with high input costs,[44] energy shortages, and logistical disarray.[45]

Other barriers to growth include falling capital expenditure (down 9.6% year-on-year in 2024),[46] long delays in the granting of prospecting and mining rights, and worrying increases in illegal mining in some areas. Skills shortages are becoming more serious too.[47]

The Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act (MPRDA) of 2002, which vested all mineral resources in the custodianship of the state, has also restricted growth by introducing increasingly onerous BEE rules in three successive iterations of the mining charter.[48] In May 2025, moreover, the minister of mineral and petroleum resources, Gwede Mantashe, gazetted a draft Mineral Resources Development Bill which seeks to amend the MPRDA in worrying ways. Among other things, the Bill will empower the minister to raise a long-standing 26% BEE ownership target to 30% or more (the ANC has long wanted a 51% target). It could also bring an end to the "continuing consequences" principle which currently protects mining companies from having to do "top-up" (replacement) ownership deals whenever BEE investors sell out. Yet if mining companies become obliged to do repeat BEE ownership deals – even at the 26% level, let alone at 30% or 51% – this would result in crippling costs.[49]

Paul Dunne, president of the Minerals Council South Africa (which represents some 90% of mining companies), has criticised the Bill for failing to put "the right policies and investment climate...in place". The Council is likely to challenge it unless the GNU improves it substantially."[50]

The onerous BEE and other rules ushered in by the MPRDA largely explain why South Africa has been slipping down the ranks of an index of mining investment attractiveness compiled by the Fraser Institute, a Canadian civil society organisation. The organisation's 2024 Annual Survey of Mining Companies puts South Africa in 68th position out of 82 mining jurisdictions (and significantly behind the war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo, in 58th place). South Africa, which used to be the greatest mining country on the continent, now lags far behind various African countries, including Morocco (in 18th position), Botswana (in 20th place) and Zambia (in 28th).[51] Its share of exploration spending has also fallen from about 5% of the global total to less than 1%.[52]

What then is to be done? The reforms required for growth and jobs are often similar to those needed in agriculture. The GNU should improve state efficiency via privatisation or public/private partnerships, by ending cadre deployment, and by shifting from damaging BEE to beneficial EED. An efficient mining cadastre – a digital portal showing geological resources and the status of applications for mining rights to them – must swiftly be introduced to improve transparency and speed up the slow permitting system.[53] In addition, the GNU should scrap the 2025 mining bill and substantially amend the MPRDA to make the granting of mining rights primarily dependent on two objective and measurable criteria: the technical and financial capacity of applicants. This would bring South Africa into line with Botswana's mining law, which has served that country very well.[54]

Tourism

South Africa has much to offer both domestic and overseas tourists. The country is a prime holiday destination, offering wild life safaris, shopping, agritourism, culinary tourism, luxury experiences and star bathing.[55] The sector is jobs-intensive and could employ millions more South Africans with limited skills. However, it suffered badly during the prolonged Covid-19 lockdown and, despite rising tourist numbers in recent years, has yet to recover in full.

In 2024 international arrivals of foreign tourists totalled 8.9 million, a 5% increase on the 2023 figure. Unfortunately, however, the 2024 figure was still 13% lower than the 10.2 million arrivals recorded in 2019. In addition, the great majority of these visitors – 6.8 million – came from elsewhere in Africa. Of the remaining 2.1 million, roughly half came from Europe, with substantial numbers arriving also from the United States and the United Kingdom.[56]

By contrast, arrivals from China and India – two of the world's largest outbound tourism markets – were paltry, totalling 41,500 for China and 75,500 for India.[57] South Africa used to attract more tourists from both countries (151,000 from China and 112,000 from India in 2013) but lost much of its allure by making its visa requirements unduly onerous.[58] Among other things, as IRR policy fellow Ivo Vegter points out, it made no provision for the group travel that most Chinese visitors prefer and demanded that visitors apply in English, "which was just as absurd as China expecting South Africans to apply for visas in Mandarin".[59]

(By contrast, Australia has made enormous efforts to remove bureaucratic obstacles to tourism – especially from China and India – and has reaped the rewards. In 2013 its Chinese visitors stood at around 700,000, but by 2023 they totalled 1.4 million.)[60]

Leon Schreiber, Democratic Alliance (DA) minister of home affairs in the GNU, says his department is intent on simplifying South Africa's tourism visa requirements. It is also rolling out "a 'trusted tour operator' scheme" aimed primarily at Chinese tourists travelling in large groups. Explains Mr Schreiber: "Essentially, tour operators bringing Chinese tourists to South Africa will be able to pre-register with Home Affairs. They will undergo vetting, screening, and security checks upfront, and sign a memorandum with the department... In return, tour operators will be able to submit group visa applications rather than individual ones. This will reduce the administrative burden and make the process faster and more efficient." [61]

The tour operator scheme is modelled on a "Trusted Employer Scheme" already introduced (see *Importing skills from elsewhere,* below). The digital platform for the tourism scheme went live in February 2025, while 65 tour operators from South Africa, India and China were approved to participate in its first phase. It is already working well, says Mr Schreiber, for "the first applications were processed within two hours, without the necessary vetting checks being compromised".[62]

Home Affairs also plans to launch an "electronic travel authorisation (ETA) system" for tourists from many other countries. This will provide a secure and fully digital visa application and adjudication process, which will be driven by AI and machine learning. This scheme should begin early in 2026, and will further support the trusted tour operator scheme.[63]

According to tourism minister Patricia de Lille (who represents the GOOD political party in the GNU), the tourism sector employed 1.8 million people in 2024 and is expected to employ "at least 2.5 million" by 2030. Towards this end, Ms de Lille told the Africa Tourism Indaba 2025 in Durban in May 2025, South Africa "wants to welcome an extra 1 million international arrivals annually", which will increase tourism's contribution to GDP from 8.8% in 2024 to at least 10% in 2030.[64]

Though the sector has considerable potential for growth, important reforms are needed to help secure this. The GNU must curb crime while substantially improving electricity, water, road transport and air travel. The visa system must be further simplified and made to work efficiently at all times. Encouraging more direct flights to China and India is important too. South Africa should also increase its potential in niche areas, ranging from medical and archeological tourism to marine and photography options.[65]

Growth potential in other labour-intensive sectors

Other sectors also have considerable potential to absorb more unskilled labour. As the infrastructure programme expands, for example – as set out in the *IRR Growth Strategy* of January 2025 – a host of unskilled jobs will open up in the construction sector. There will also be increased demand for new schools, houses, and clinics and for the provision of energy, water and transport.[66]

The retail sector is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of more than 4% between 2022 (when its overall market size was R1.6 trillion) and 2027.[67] Consumer spending on fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) has expanded considerably over the past five years, reaching R640bn in 2024. Some 10,000 FMCG stores were added over this period, amounting to roughly one store every day.[68] Capital spending in 2025 is expected to total some R16bn, most of which (says Trade Intelligence in a recent Corporate Retail Comparative Report), will focus on "store expansions, maintenance, IT infrastructure and [other] strategic growth initiatives".[69]

Some of the proposed expansion will be targeted at the "township" market, or the roughly 11.6 million people living in some 530 townships.[70] According to the 2024 *Township Customer Experience Report* – which gathered and evaluated data from 1,600 respondents[71] – many township residents shop regularly at "spaza" shops or small convenience stores often attached to people's homes. (The equivalent township report for 2023 put the number of spazas at 200,000, while its 2021 predecessor said that spaza shops contributed 5.2% to South Africa's GDP and employed about 2.6 million people.)[72]

Shoprite, the largest listed FMCG retailer, with turnover of R240bn and a 12% growth rate in 2024, has been tapping into the township market since 2001, when it opened its first Usave township store.[73] It now operates more than 460 such stores across the country and plans to double that number by 2030.[74]

Spaza shops are modernising and taking advantage of digital technologies. According to Trade Intelligence, "younger consumers [often] use platforms like WhatsApp and Uber Eats to place orders. Fintech solutions such as digital payment systems and cost-effective merchant services have also been widely adopted, enhancing efficiency and profitability." In addition, many spazas have found value in developing links with major suppliers such as Shoprite, which offers them on-line shopping and free delivery services.[75]

According to author GG Alcock, the township economy includes many other informal businesses too. These include a hairdressing sector (operating mainly from people's homes) as well as a rental sector hiring out backrooms, an auto sector servicing and panel beating vehicles, a construction sector providing bricklaying, electrical and plumbing work, and a security sector supplying burglar guards and gates. In addition, he says, there are thousands of vendors selling takeaway foods at taxi ranks and schools, undertakers running funeral parlours, and "mashonisas" lending out money at often extortionate rates. In addition, there are some 800,000 "stokvels" or community savings clubs, with about 11 million members and R50bn under their control.[76]

In Mr Alcock's view, much of the informal economy has never been adequately measured by Stats SA. If all its enterprises were taken into account, he believes, South Africa's unemployment rate would be about 12%, not 33.2%.[77] In June 2025 this assessment was echoed by Gerrie Fourie, outgoing CEO of Capitec Bank, who estimated the true joblessness rate at around 10%.[78] Mr Fourie based this assessment on Capitec's 24 million clients, many of whom use their personal bank accounts for business purposes.[79] Capitec's figures suggest the presence of 3 million unregistered businesses, plus another 3 million small enterprises that have formalised their operations. [80]

By contrast, Stats SA estimates that 1.9 million people are running businesses not registered for VAT. In its assessment, the informal sector contributes some 6% to South Africa's GDP and was thus valued at around R440bn in 2024.[81] Its figures put informal employment at 19.5% of total employment at the end of 2024.[82] In measuring informal employment, moreover, it avoids asking people if they have "jobs" – as this concept can be understood in different ways – and instead queries whether they have "earned in the past week".[83]

Business Day commented that Stats SA follows "globally benchmarked methods to survey and calculate the unemployment rate". Hence, though the unemployment rate could well be a few percentage points below the Stats SA figure, it was "unlikely" to be as low as 10%.[84]

Professor Haroon Bhorat of the University of Cape Town weighed in on the issue too. In his experience (as *Business Day* reports) "wage employment provides 45% of the jobs in the average middle income country, [while] informally employed people make up another 45%", [putting] the unemployment rate at 10%". South Africa is different, however, because wage employment makes up 50% of the total, while "informal employment stands at 16%". This puts the unemployment rate at around 34%.[85]

Two particular obstacles have kept South Africa's informal sector unusually small, he suggests. The first is excessive regulation better suited to an advanced economy than a developing one. Municipal bylaws, in particular (as Hilary Joffe, editor-at-large of *Business Day* points out), "put up high barriers" through a "complex, costly, [and] often punitive" web of rules covering "everything from zoning and licensing to tariffs and health requirements".[86]

Poor infrastructure is the second major obstacle. Informal street traders need lighting, running water, ablution facilities, access to Wi-fi and lockable storage for their stock. They also require effective policing to clamp down on theft and assault.[87]

What then can be done expand and legalise the informal economy? The GNU should simplify the relevant regulations and make sure that what remains is efficiently implemented too. Forms and fees should be kept to a minimum to limit administrative costs.[88] The GNU must also provide the infrastructure needed by street traders and township entrepreneurs. Given the extent of municipal dysfunction, this should generally be done with the help of cost-effective public/private partnerships. Policing must be significantly improved as well, while pervasive corruption within the ranks of the force must be stamped out.[89]

The tax issue must be tackled too. The GNU might be tempted to siphon off as much revenue as possible from a still largely untaxed informal sector, but this should be avoided. Rather, informal entrepreneurs should be exempted from VAT – not on the inputs they buy, which are already mostly subject to VAT – but rather on the goods and services they sell. Tax amnesties may also be needed for small enterprises that have been evading tax for some time. As Tiisetso Motsoeneng, acting editor of *Business Day* has pointed out, businesses "running on wafer-thin margins" cannot afford "a deluge of costs" when they seek to formalise their businesses.[90]

Habits of non-payment in the townships need also to be broken. In March 2025 the total amount owed to municipalities across the country stood at R416bn, well up on the R347bn that remained unpaid the previous year.[91] Some R300bn of this R416bn is owed by households – many of which may be using unpaid electricity and water to run informal township businesses. Non-payment reduces operating costs, but it also makes it harder for municipalities to maintain the infrastructure now breaking down. The GNU should thus prevail on informal entrepreneurs to start paying for at least some of the electricity and water they use to help secure supply. After decades of non-payment, this will be difficult to do. The GNU would also have to overcome municipal inefficiency and corruption, which requires an end to cadre deployment and preferential procurement rules.[92]

What might superficially seem like a simple reform cannot be resolved without overcoming deeper problems. However, the stakes are also high. The informal economy is already an important asset abounding in entrepreneurial energy and creative solutions to market needs. The more it expands and starts abiding by reasonable regulations, the more it will generate jobs and help raise the growth rate in the wider economy too.

Boosting skills and productivity

South Africa remains chronically short of skills of all kinds, from management to financial, engineering, information and communications technology (ICT), artisan, and other technical skills.[93] The country's limited skills base makes it difficult for businesses to find employees with the know-how and competence they need. This in itself is a serious constraint on investment, growth, productivity and competitiveness. Poor skills also reduce people's chances of finding work or climbing the jobs ladder to prosperity. The skills shortage must thus speedily be overcome.

Many more skilled artisans and technicians must be produced – which requires reforms to schooling as well as Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges and Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs). A large number of managers and professionals of different kinds are needed too. This requirement can be met by improving university training and throughput, encouraging skilled immigration, and changing race-based "transformation" rules to promote the use of all available skills.

In this respect, again, the imperatives are not just to provide inputs into the economy. Skills are an absolutely critical foundation for upward mobility: they enable their holders to enter particular careers, to climb promotion ladders within workplaces, and to seek out alternative opportunities. Skills thus give people a meaningful sense of confidence in their future prospects and abilities to provide for their families. Skilled individuals also help increase productivity and generate greater wealth, making them feel more invested in the success of their enterprises and the broader society. The more widely skills are spread throughout the population, thus, the more this will contribute to South Africa's social cohesion.

Getting basic schooling right

The South African government spends more on Grade 1 to Grade 12 schooling than most other middle-income countries (R347bn or 4.4% of GDP in 2025/26).[94] However, it gets little bang for its extensive buck. Some 80% of public schools are dysfunctional, failing to impart even the basic skills of reading, writing and 'rithmetic. Roughly 81% of South Africa's Grade 4 pupils thus cannot read for meaning in any language, while 61% of Grade 5 pupils are unable to add and subtract whole numbers.[95] Not surprisingly, more than half of all pupils drop out of school before matric or fail their final examinations.[96]

South African schools are particularly dysfunctional – but many of the problems here are also evident in public schools in many other countries. Millions of parents across four continents have thus been voting with their children's feet by taking them out of free public schools and sending them to low-cost private schools instead. These schools have become ubiquitous in India, sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere, and are often located in the slums and shantytowns where the poorest people live. Despite their limited resources, low-cost private schools generally notch up significantly better academic results than public ones. This is primarily because classes are smaller, teachers work harder, and principals have the power to hire and fire. Private schools offer many other benefits too, including effective discipline and an emphasis on hard work, honesty, and self-reliance.[97]

Private (or independent) schools have grown strongly in South Africa in the past 20 years. However, the number of pupils attending them is still only a small fraction (roughly 5.8%) of the 12.7 million learners at the country's 22,500 public schools.[98] Many more parents would like the benefits of private schooling too, but most simply cannot afford this. This barrier can be overcome, however, by introducing tax-funded schooling vouchers for the disadvantaged.

The voucher idea is a simple one. Instead of funding schools directly – and continuing that funding regardless of how poorly a school performs – the government works out the per capita amount for all children in low-income families and allocates that per capita sum to each child's parents. In the words of James Tooley, vice chancellor of the University of Buckingham in the United Kingdom and a world expert on the issue: "Parents choose a school for their child, and the funding goes with the child to the school of their choice." Schools use this funding to pay their operating costs, including teacher salaries. "In the competitive market for schools that results, popular schools attract more children... Importantly, schools become accountable to parents",[99] who can withdraw their vouchers if they are dissatisfied with the performance of their chosen schools. The introduction of vouchers thus "spurs competition and innovation in schooling, leading to great improvements".[100]

Tax-funded vouchers would not increase the schooling budget but would vastly expand parental choice, allowing families to choose between private "for-profit" schools, schools run by non-governmental organisations, and public schools with new-found incentives to improve their performance. In this competitive environment, all schools would do far better at imparting basic literacy and numeracy. This in turn would equip pupils to acquire valuable vocational skills, or pursue professional careers requiring a sound grounding in science, technology, economics, and mathematics. Tax-funded schooling vouchers would thus be far more effective in empowering the poor than current BEE policies will ever be (see *Breaking the BEE Barrier to Growth*).[101]

Reforming Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges

In 2023 there were some 518,600 students enrolled in 50 public TVET colleges.[102] According to the 2013 *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training,* the government's aim has long been to increase TVET enrolments to 2.5 million by 2030. (This target is significantly higher than the 1.6 million proposed for university students in that year.)[103]

TVET colleges offer a vocational matric for pupils in grades 10-12, as well as vocational studies at the post-school level.[104] They originated in the pre-1994 apprenticeship system, under which apprentices learning trade-specific skills spent nine months of the year in work placements (mostly at state-owned enterprises or SOEs), and the remaining three months doing short courses at "technical colleges", as they were known.

After 1994, these technical colleges were amalgamated into 50 Further Education and Training (FET) colleges, spread over some 260 campuses. These colleges later became TVETs offering full-time technical training, rather than three-month courses. However, many of their teaching staff lacked subject and pedagogical skills and were poorly prepared for this shift.[105] In addition, full-time courses left no time for work placements, which hindered the development of practical skills. Worse still, many TVET students had poor levels of literacy and numeracy and struggled with course work. Throughput rates were dismal, while graduates often battled to find jobs – in part because their TVET training was also poorly suited to employer needs.[106]

In 2017 a commission of inquiry into the funding of tertiary education (appointed by President Jacob Zuma and chaired by Judge Arthur Heher) concluded that "the TVET college sector was too small for the size and level of development of our economy". A mere 2% of South African pupils aged 15 to 19 were enrolled in TVET colleges, whereas "industrialised countries had over 6% of the youth cohort in vocational education". This indicated, wrote Judge Heher, that *"the TVET college sector should increase threefold"*.[107]

Part of the problem, Heher found, was that funding for the TVET sector was inadequate. In theory, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) covered 80% of TVET tuition fees, while students paid only the 20% remaining. In addition, students unable to afford this 20% could obtain state bursaries from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). In practice, however, DHET funding often fell short of the 80% required. In the 2017/18 financial year, for instance, TVETs were funded "at 53% rather than 80%, as per policy".[108]

Having concluded that the government could not afford "free" tertiary education for all, Judge Heher urged the state to make TVET (rather than university) courses "fee-free".[109] The government, he urged, should in future cover 100% of TVET tuition fees. Stipends for accommodation and other costs should also be made available to needy students. If the government could not afford this further expense, then income-contingent loans (ICLs) (of the kind proposed for universities, as outlined below) should be made available to TVET students for this purpose.[110]

According to Judge Heher, some of the challenges confronting TVET colleges "could be solved through efficiency changes". However, many required "additional funding."[111] Already, there was a "severe funding crisis" at TVETs, which was "impacting on capacity, quality, throughput, staff ratios, infrastructure maintenance, research,...and transformation".[112] Part of the problem was that the current system was "skewed towards university education and would not self-correct". Hence, a massive focus on TVET colleges would be needed to develop them properly, change public perceptions and make TVET colleges "attractive institutions of choice".[113]

To achieve this shift, various other reforms would be needed. "Throughput and drop-out levels in TVET colleges" required "serious and urgent attention".[114] Curriculum changes were essential too, to "ensure that the curriculum meets the needs of the economy and society".[115] TVET lecturers "with the required skills and industry experience" would have to be "trained and encouraged to enter the sector". ICT and blended learning techniques should also be used to increase efficiency, improve academic support, and ensure that graduates were better prepared for the world of work.[116]

Judge Heher's recommendations had little impact on Mr Zuma, however. Instead, the president used the ANC's national congress in December 2017 to announce the introduction of "free" education for all students with maximum family incomes of R350,000 a year. Attendance would be free not only at TVET colleges, as Judge Heher had urged, but also at all universities. In future, moreover, this funding would take the form of a 100% grant rather than a loan to be repaid.[117] This was precisely what Judge Heher had warned against, saying the fiscus could not afford it.

The TVET funding formula remained largely the same as in the past, with the government providing 80% of tuition fees, and needy students obtaining NSFAS funding for the remaining 20%. In future, however, NSFAS would also cover accommodation or travel costs,[118] which was an important addition. Overall, however, TVET colleges have continued to struggle with funding shortages, while other challenges highlighted by Judge Heher have yet to be overcome.

Reforming the TVET sector requires a host of changes. The GNU should modernise curricula and align them more closely with the needs of the economy. It should ensure that lecturers are equipped with sound content knowledge and good pedagogical skills. It should explore the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI, in the form of Large Language Models or LLMs) to provide TVET students with personal study "guides" to help improve their understanding and proficiency. Necessary foundational skills must be imparted too, before TVET training begins, which requires more effective schooling.

The importance of the TVET sector should constantly be stressed. Many academic disciplines in the humanities are over-subscribed and do not lead to jobs, whereas sound technical skills are in high demand and short supply. Moreover, unless the technical skills deficit is reversed, the economy will lose even more of the complexity it used to have.[119] The benefits of TVET training must thus be thoroughly communicated to all South Africans.

The GNU should also implement an improved funding formula for both TVET colleges and universities. To help shift demand from universities already struggling with excessive "massification" and high drop-out rates, the GNU should terminate "free" university education and replace this with a system of income-contingent loans, as outlined below. It should then use scarce tax revenues to fund well-crafted TVET courses offering substantial value not only to students from low-income families but also to society.

To stimulate competition and increase efficiency, TVET funding should be made available to needy students via tax-funded TVET vouchers. Under the current payment system, tax revenues flow directly to public TVET colleges and remain much the same each year, regardless of how well or badly these colleges perform. Under a voucher system, by contrast, the revenue now being badly spent would be divided among needy TVET students in the form of tax-funded vouchers, redeemable only for TVET courses.

Like the tax-funded school vouchers earlier described, TVET vouchers would follow students to the TVET colleges of their choice, which would use them to pay lecturers and meet other vital needs. TVET colleges would then have to compete with one another to attract and retain the custom of their students. This competition would give them powerful incentives to improve their efficiency and keep their costs down.

Competition for voucher-bearing TVET students would also encourage the establishment of many more private technical colleges. At present South Africa has 50 public TVET colleges and roughly 350 private colleges. However, the latter colleges are barred from state funding and currently cater for only 72,000 students.[120] Tax-funded TVET vouchers would level the playing field as between public and private institutions. Many more independent TVET colleges would then spring up. Some would be established by non-governmental organisations but most would be developed by "for-profit" companies or "edupreneurs" looking to meet an important societal need and to make a living too.

Scrapping wasteful Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs)

Prior to 1994, employers were granted tax incentives for on-the-job training for their employees – and business spent an average of 1% of payroll on the training of their choice.[121] After the political transition, however, labour minister Tito Mboweni introduced a new system, under which all employers with annual payrolls exceeding R500,000 must pay a levy of 1% of payroll into a skills development fund. From this, 20% goes to a "national skills fund" intended to provide training for small business and the unemployed. The remaining 80% goes to 21 (down from 25) Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), established under the Skills Development Act of 1998. Employers must apply to these SETAs to recover the costs of approved training for their staff .[122]

Mr Mboweni promised that the new system would usher in a "skills revolution", but employers soon complained that SETAs were overly cumbersome and bureaucratic. Levies were being paid and SETAs were accumulating revenue – but obtaining SETA approval for training was so difficult, especially for small businesses, that much of the money supposed to be dedicated to training was languishing unspent in SETA coffers.[123]

SETA performance has remained dismal. In 2013 a report by the Human Resource Development Council (HRDC) found that SETAs battled to identify training needs and develop relevant training courses and thus had "little impact on skills development". Though they had managed to place "large numbers" of people in learnerships over the years, the relatively few who had completed these courses still lacked the skills in demand in the workplace.[124]

In 2016 the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) reported that SETAs had "poor research capacity, poor data management, a lack of skills development expertise, and weak leadership and governance".[125] In 2021 a report by the Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE), a civil society organisation, added that the tax revenues allocated to the SETAs were mostly being wasted: "In just over five years (2011-2016), financial losses due to SETA trainees and learners not completing their programmes totalled R13.4 billion, 44 percent of the R30.8 billion allocated. All that money came from businesses contributing 1 percent of their payroll to the skills development fund. Yet these businesses were receiving almost no value for their money."[126]

In 2025 Wayne Duvenage, head of the Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse (OUTA), warned that "many SETAs had become breeding grounds for corruption, cadre patronage and unchecked maladministration". For years, he went on, OUTA had monitored the work of three SETAs in particular and found bad outcomes at all of them.[127] At the Insurance SETA (Inseta), for example, there was evidence of "several highly dubious and grossly inflated multimillion-rand contracts …being awarded to companies with little to no experience". The Services SETA too had made "highly inflated tender awards…between 2016 and 2019". It had also largely failed to implement a Werksman's forensic report highlighting "fraudulent contracts" and other irregularities. The Construction Education and Training Authority (CETA) had "entered into several dubious contracts with the same suppliers [as] were implicated in the Werksmans report". [128] In July 2025 OUTA project manager Rudie Heyneke noted that SETAs received R21bn a year from taxpayers, but often failed to obtain clean audits or meet employers' training needs. "SETAs should be scrapped if they are not functioning properly and effectively", he said.[129]

SETA officials are often also inefficient and uncaring. Comments management consultant Gizelle Hutchinson: "SETAs should play a central role in improving the skills of South Africa's workforce, especially considering our unemployment crisis. Yet, far too often, they hinder rather than help… Instead of working together with businesses to develop skills, SETAs often act like gatekeepers, creating unnecessary hurdles and delays."[130]

The GNU should simply scrap the entire SETA system. Employers do not need a complex, bureaucratic, and wasteful intermediary system to determine their training needs and then find ways to meet them.[131] Instead, they should once again be given tax credits for providing their employees with the "on-the-job" training they consider best suited to their needs.

Changing university admissions and funding formulas

Since the political transition, the number of university students (including those at universities of technology) has almost doubled, rising from 575,000 in 1995 to close on 1.1 million in 2022.[132] Expansion is still proceeding, for the 2013 *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* seeks to increase student enrolment to 1.6 million by 2030.[133]

Rapid massification has made for declining quality. The state's subsidy to universities – already low by international standards – has failed to keep up with rising student numbers.[134] The number of new academic staff appointed has also failed to keep pace with increasing enrolments.[135] Worst of all, a mostly dysfunctional schooling system is still largely failing to equip students for the rigours of university study.

Throughput rates are dismal, with only 17% of students on average graduating with a three-year undergraduate degree within three years (the "regulation period").[136] Completion rates within regulation periods for three-year under-graduate degrees in STEM fields are particularly worrying, standing in 2022 at 14% in physical sciences, 15% in computer and information sciences, 19% in engineering, and 11% in mathematics and statistics.[137]

Instead of trying to overcome these difficult challenges, the government has instead focused on providing "free" university education to all poor and working-class students. In 2017 – after three years of increasingly violent #FeesMustFall protests costing universities some R800m in arson attacks and other damage to property[138]– Mr Zuma announced, as earlier noted, that free education would be provided in 2018 for all prospective first-year students with maximum annual household incomes of R350,000.[139]

The National Treasury had made no provision for this unexpected spending increase. In 2018 some R57bn was nevertheless allocated to free university education over the next three years. Much of the additional revenue was obtained by raising the VAT rate by one percentage point, thereby obliging the poor to help pay for the fee-free education of the relative elite. Yet it was also evident that "free" education would bring few benefits to either students or society while throughput rates remained so low.

The GNU must thus embark on a number of reforms. It should significantly tighten up the requirements for university admission (for "a bachelor's pass", as the government calls it) to eliminate poorly prepared students with few prospects of success. It should also end "free" university education and introduce a new funding model.

As Judge Heher recommends, all university students should be funded via income-contingent loans (ICLs), to be repaid by them when their earnings reach specified levels. These loans must be obtained from commercial banks, with the backing of state guarantees, and must be sufficient to cover the full costs of study (from tuition and accommodation to subsistence stipends and travel).[140] In addition, as the commission urges, "strict academic requirements for *continued access* to an ICL should be introduced. This should be monitored from as early as the first module or semester of the first year".[141] [142]

Similar ICLs have been introduced in various other countries, based on the recognition that university education is both a public and a private good. Sound university education increases productivity and helps expand the economy, which is a public good. But graduates with scarce skills benefit from increased earnings throughout their careers, which is a private advantage.[143] The ICL approach is thus widely seen as fair. It expects those who can afford to pay to do just that: either immediately or in the future. It also increases access as "no one is refused loans on grounds other than normal university admission criteria", as Judge Heher notes.[144]

The GNU should make other changes too. As Judge Heher proposed, it should increase state subsidies to universities to 1% of GDP,[145] which is closer to international norms (and will also be more affordable once the ICL system is in place). However, the GNU should also ensure that the increased subsidy goes to private universities as well as public ones. This will increase competition, thereby giving failing public universities incentives to improve their performance. The ICL system will also enhance efficiency as both students and lending banks will want effective performance from the universities that students have chosen.

Importing skills from elsewhere

Improving the quality of South Africa's schooling and tertiary education will inevitably take time. However, better skills are immediately required to increase productivity, quicken the growth rate, and generate more jobs. The only swift solution is for South Africa to import the skills it needs – but current policies have made this difficult to do.

In 2011 South Africa introduced a "critical skills visa" system, with some flexibility in the granting of visas to individuals with the skills identified by the state as critical. Often, however, the state's choice of critical skills seems "absurd", as CDE director Ann Bernstein has pointed out. The list is also subject to change from time to time, making it uncertain whether skills permitted at one point will be allowed in the future.[146]

In April 2023 the backlog in the processing of visas of all kinds, including critical skills ones, stood at some 75,000.[147] Critical skills visas seemed particularly difficult to obtain, commented Dr Jakkie Cilliers, chairman of the board of the Institute of Security Studies (ISS), a civil society organisation. In the six years from 2015 to 2021, said Dr Cilliers, Home Affairs had rejected more than half (52%) these applications, while "only 16,100 critical skilled-worker permits had been approved".[148]

The chief executive of Business Leadership South Africa, Busi Mavuso, also criticised the "staggering" backlog in dealing with visa applications, which was a major constraint on growth. Added Ms Mavuso: "The fact that companies can't fill the positions means they can't invest and expand. Expansion would enable much further employment, more tax to be generated, and the overall business environment to be greatly improved."[149]

Various reforms have since been introduced with the help of Operation Vulindlela in the Presidency and Dr Schreiber as minister of home affairs. Though the total number of unprocessed visa applications rose to 300,000 in 2024, some 90% of the backlog was cleared by early in 2025.[150] A new points-based skills visa was also introduced, along with a "trusted-employer scheme" and a remote work visa for digital nomads".[151]

The points-based system enables foreigners with specified levels of tertiary qualifications and employment earnings to obtain visas more quickly. The digital nomad visa makes it easier for skilled individuals to work inside South Africa for employers located outside the country. The trusted employer scheme (TES) provides qualifying employers with a simpler and faster application process – for both critical skills and general work visas – which dispenses with some of the documentation earlier required. Starting in July 2025, moreover, the scheme will no longer require in-person applications. This will usher in a fully digitised system and eliminate a major practical constraint.[152]

Further reforms may, however, be derailed by a new national labour migration policy and proposed Employment Services Amendment Bill recently unveiled by the Department of Employment and Labour. Some aspects of the proposed migration policy are positive, as they would allow the spouses and children of foreign executives to obtain visas more easily. But the policy focuses mainly on "quotas and restrictions", as *Business Day* has commented in an editorial.[153]

As this editorial points out, "sectoral quotas...[will] be set for foreigners and [will] prescribe where they can and can't be employed". There will also be restrictions on "foreign business visas in particular sectors", as well as on the foreign ownership of small businesses. In addition, quotas will be introduced for foreign workers in sectors such as agriculture, hospitality, tourism and construction. This "market-unfriendly" approach, comments *Business Day,* is so different from that of Operation Vulindlela that "one wonders whether the government's left hand knows what the right hand is doing".[154]

Many of the proposed changes are to be implemented under the Employment Services Amendment Bill. Under this measure, notes law firm Cliffe Dekker Hofmeyr, the minister of employment and labour will set "maximum quotas" for foreign workers in specified sectors. Employers will not be permitted to exceed these quotas except where "critical skills are required" or the minister grants exemptions. In addition, employers wanting to employ foreign nationals will have to secure the correct work visas. They will also have to "satisfy themselves" that no South Africans possess the skills in issue, that foreign skills are transferred to local employees, and that foreign nationals work under conditions of employment "no less favourable" than those provided to South Africans.[155]

Gerhard Papenfus, CEO of the National Employers' Association of South Africa (Neasa), criticises the proposals, saying: "A company cannot be dictated to about recruiting people who have skills that are scarce or absent in South Africa... Where a particular skill is required, you must leave it to the company to make that call."[156]

The Vulindlela reforms are thus at risk of being rolled back. Yet the skills shortage remains so great that the GNU must now intervene to put the country back on the right path. Among other things, it should allow companies wanting to do business in South Africa to bring in all the skilled foreigners they need with minimal state intervention. Employers have a strong self-interest in carefully vetting incumbent and prospective staff, particularly at senior levels, and their scrutiny should generally be accepted as sufficient.

If growth is to take off, the GNU may also need to start welcoming all legal immigrants with credible post-school qualifications. It should also help Home Affairs improve its performance still further by ending cadre deployment, giving priority to the "value-for-money" principle in all procurement contracts, and ensuring that wrongdoers are held accountable. In addition, it should speed up efficient digitisation in Home Affairs (and other departments) by scrapping the monopoly powers long granted to the ineffective State Information Technology Agency (SITA). In Mr Schreiber's words, a government IT agency is "needed for interoperability", but SITA's monopoly is "'a proven failure' causing system outages, data risks, and website failures".[157]

Shifting from BEE to EED to encourage the use of all available skills

"It doesn't matter if the cat is white or black so long as it catches mice", Deng Xiaoping, paramount leader of the Chinese Communist Party, famously said as China was embarking on major economic reforms. The same approach must now apply in South Africa, where all skills available should be used to the full, regardless of skin colour and the racial quotas required by the Employment Equity Act of 1998 and black economic empowerment (BEE) rules.

The ANC has long tried to convince black South Africans that their advancement depends solely on the racial quotas it compels most employers to fulfil. This claim is false. In fact, the demand for skilled black people in supervisory and management positions has been rising steadily since the early 1970s, when it became apparent – after a decade of robust growth – that the white population was too small to meet the needs of the economy.

Prevailing official thinking also seems to see South Africa's economy as a static pie, which must be divided up among the different racial groups according to their "share" of the overall population. This too is absurd. The more the economy grows, the more jobs there will be for people of all races. And if the growth rate can be raised substantially – ideally, to the 7% of GDP that would double the size of the economy every ten years – the demand for additional skills of every kind will be enormous.

Better ways to empower the disadvantaged are urgently required, as the IRR has previously outlined in an earlier *Blueprint* paper, *Breaking the BEE Barrier to Growth.* Those with vested interests in the current harmful rules will resist any change from BEE to an effective and race-neutral system of Economic Empowerment for the Disadvantaged (EED). However, as IRR opinion polls over many years have shown, the great majority of South Africans want the growth, jobs, tax-funded vouchers and bottom-up empowerment that EED offers. Most are also well aware that racial quotas will never help them get ahead. With the GNU in place and committed to inclusive growth, the time has come for it to abandon the race-based approach that helps the few and harms the many – and to make the vital shift from BEE to EED.

Time to think outside the box

For more than 30 years, the ANC – together with its trade union and communist allies – has been intent on expanding and entrenching state control over the economy and society. The negative effects of these destructive policies are everywhere apparent. They manifest in paltry growth rates and mammoth unemployment ones. They show themselves in widespread state dysfunction, collapsing infrastructure and pervasive crime. They are also the main factors behind an under-performing agricultural sector, a shrinking mining industry, a tourism sector not yet restored to 2019 levels, and an informal economy hobbled by over-regulation.

All of this is making South Africans poorer. It is a malady across society: among the large community of "outsiders", who find few opportunities; within the established workforce and middle classes, who find their personal finances and lifestyles under pressure; and even among the more affluent, for whom South Africa is becoming increasingly risky and unpredictable. The resulting social stresses are taking their toll. Unless this dire situation can be turned around, the country faces the prospect of ongoing and deepening social conflict, and long term social disintegration.

Interventions so far have produced indifferent results. The long-promised "skills revolution" has also not transpired. Instead, despite major spending on education, most public schools are dysfunctional, TVETs impart few useful skills, and SETAs do more for bureaucrats and often corrupt "tenderpreneurs" than the businesses they are supposed to serve. Universities are battling with poor throughput, which they cannot improve under flawed massification and "free" education policies. At the same time, scarce skills that could be imported are kept out. And the home-grown skills of individuals with the "wrong" skin colour are excluded to meet racial quotas that help a small elite but harm the great majority.

The time has come to think outside the box. The GNU should abandon the statist ideology in which the ANC alliance has steeped South Africa. In all the spheres earlier outlined, state intervention is the problem, not the solution. The state must, of course, collect the taxes needed to help fund education and fulfil other essential needs. But the state – especially a state this inefficient and corrupt – need not be involved in delivery. Nor should it be allowed to obtain the monopoly powers that the ANC wants.

Centralised and top-down state delivery empowers bureaucrats, rather than ordinary South Africans. It disregards their needs, while encouraging more regulation, excluding competition and stifling innovation. Yet competition and innovation are vital to efficiency and any impetus to deliver to a higher standard and at a lower cost.

The GNU should embrace all the reforms outlined here to stimulate faster growth, encourage very much more employment, and remove constraints holding back sectors, especially tradeable ones, with the capacity to absorb large numbers of poorly-skilled people. It should also usher in a long-promised skills "revolution" by introducing school and TVET vouchers for the disadvantaged, so as promote competition and improve efficiency. It should also scrap ineffective and costly SETAs, along with damaging massification and "free" education at universities. Instead, the GNU should embrace the Heher commission reforms and ensure that adequately-prepared students are funded via income-contingent loans, backed by state guarantees.

The GNU should also avoid mooted quotas for foreign workers and instead focus on making it far easier for people with scarce skills to work inside South Africa.

All these reforms are important. But tax-funded vouchers are particularly valuable because they link necessary state funding to vital competition in delivery. Since vouchers go to low-income individuals and their families, they also give them the capacity to choose between providers vying for their custom. Little could be more empowering for people long mired in poverty and confined to the margins of society.

The heavy hand of an intrusive and inefficient state is the common denominator in current obstacles to growth, employment and skills. That heavy hand must be removed. Its debilitating weight has been bearing down on the country for decades – and it is time for the GNU to lift it away so that a stifled economy can start to prosper and expand and a fractured society can look towards a brighter future.

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