

## PART FOUR

# The Practice of Service

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**Penny Foley** is the Youth Service Programme Manager at the Umsobomvu Youth Fund in South Africa. Prior to that she worked for ten years at the Joint Enrichment Project, a non-governmental youth organisation in Johannesburg. She has extensive experience of working as a volunteer, initially for the Uniting Church in Australia, and later with the South African Council of Churches (SACC). She continues to volunteer in initiatives on unemployment through her membership of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

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# Youth Service for Employment

## The Umsobomvu Youth Fund initiative in South Africa

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PENNY FOLEY

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### SUMMARY

This chapter outlines the role played by a government-initiated fund for youth employment in South Africa in providing structured youth service programmes for unemployed young people.

Both government and civil society organisations have been committed to national youth service in South Africa for the past decade. The policy framework has supported the development of multiple initiatives which have drawn on the continued energy and enthusiasm for voluntarism that exists in South Africa.

The chapter describes the approach taken by the Umsobomvu Youth Fund in the last two years to create a programme

responsive to the needs of young people. The initiative is located within the larger policy environment in which a range of complementary national strategies have been put in place to create opportunities for skills development and job creation throughout South African society.

An account is given of the principles used to guide the initiation of youth service projects, and some of the challenges of developing appropriate cost and budget strategies are outlined. The chapter concludes that the costs of such projects mean that a national youth service programme is not affordable as a solution to mass unemployment. As a consequence, strategic choices have to be made about the beneficiaries of programmes as well as how the programmes relate to economic opportunities.

## Introduction

In many developing countries, the introduction of national youth service has been driven by government through national policy and budget provision (Perold & Omar 1997). While this has been the case in South Africa, the process has not been solely reliant on, nor solely led by, the state. Since 1994, when the country's first democracy was established after the demise of apartheid, government has repeatedly stated its support for the notion of a national youth service, and some progress has been made towards developing an appropriate policy framework. Various programmes have been implemented during this period, primarily in the non-governmental, health and education sectors.

The imperatives for national youth service in South Africa are similar to those in other developing countries (eg. nation-building, skills development, poverty alleviation and employment). However, South Africa's youth service policy framework adopts an approach that recognises that there are many different ways in which youth service programmes can be implemented. This builds on the fact that throughout the country there are a multiplicity of service initiatives that have been in place for some time and that continue to grow. It also recognises that different types of service programmes are appropriate for young people in different circumstances.

There has always been a strong tradition of volunteer activity in South Africa, and this has not changed or declined since liberation. A recent study (Swilling & Russell 2002) put the labour value of volunteering in the non-profit sector in 1999 at R5.1bn. Furthermore, the highest level of employment among young people (20 per cent) occurs in the volunteer service sector (Stats SA 2001).

Despite a growing perception that young people have become less interested in volunteering, thousands of young people are in fact volunteering their time in a range of initiatives, particularly in the health sector.

What volunteering does not do, however, is change the economic circumstances faced by youth. Today, unemployment is the dominant experience of young people. A survey of youth in 2000 indicated that 20 per cent of young people believe that they will never be employed. The reality is that 40 per cent of them are unlikely ever to find employment. And as the political and economic landscape has changed since 1994, so have the experiences, expectations and identities of young people. Inclusion in the political system in South Africa is no longer a burning issue for most young people; what is at stake is inclusion in the economic system.

The Umsobomvu Youth Fund (UYF) is a national agency established by government to change the circumstances of unemployed youth. One of the programmes that Umsobomvu has launched is a national youth service programme that views service as a pathway to identified economic opportunity.

**South Africa's youth service policy framework adopts an approach that recognises that there are many different ways in which youth service programmes can be implemented**

## The Umsobomvu Youth Service programme model

The Umsobomvu Youth Fund's approach to youth service is characterised by three key features.

First, the Fund aims to create a programme that can respond to the needs of young people and enable them to access new opportunities for employment and income-generation; develop technical and professional competence and life skills; and contribute to national objectives for reconstruction and development.

Secondly, it believes that programmes should profile the remarkable energy and resourcefulness of young people and demonstrate the value of engaging them in national service initiatives.

And thirdly, the Fund locates these initiatives within the larger policy environment in which a range of complementary national strategies have been put in place to create opportunities for skills development and job creation throughout South African society and the economy. Since 1994, under the democratic government, the following national initiatives have shaped the South African education and socio-economic context:

- The South African Qualifications Act of September 1995;
- The National Skills Development Act of November 1998;
- The Higher Education White Paper and Act of December 1997;
- The Further Education and Training White Paper and Act of October 1998;
- The Child Care Act of 1996 and report of the Law Commission on the Juvenile Justice Act of 1994;
- The Urban Renewal and Integrated Sustainable Development Strategies and Programmes;
- The Local Government White Paper and Municipal Demarcation Act of 1998;
- The Municipal Structures Act of 1999 and Municipal Systems Act of 2000;
- The Green and draft White Papers on the National Youth Service;
- The National Youth Development Framework adopted in 2001; and
- A host of physical and infrastructure development initiatives launched within the context of poverty alleviation programmes.

Within this policy environment, funding dedicated to the implementation of youth service projects through the Umsobomvu Youth Fund provides new opportunities for the systemic integration of national youth service into the social and economic fabric of South African life.

The programme model is one which uses service opportunities to enable young people to develop their skills and access employment or generate income themselves. The programme design aims to ensure that both the young people participating in service, and the communities in which service is rendered, benefit from youth service initiatives.

How, then, can such a diversified, 'bottom-up' model of youth service be implemented whilst providing the young participants with a realistic chance of gaining employment or generating income in the long term?

**The programme model uses service opportunities to enable young people to develop their skills and access employment or generate income themselves**

## Breaking new ground

Starting out on a pilot basis and working within the national policy framework and youth service programme model outlined above, the Umsobomvu Youth Fund identified three non-governmental organisations (NGOs) keen to develop and implement projects for unemployed youth. Each project undertook to:

- Identify employment or entrepreneurial opportunities which the young participants could access and sustain beyond the project, and ensure that these opportunities are realised;
- Undertake service activities which benefit a community, in line with national development objectives, whilst helping participants gain the relevant experience and skills to become employed or start a business; and
- Provide structured and accredited learning programmes to develop the skills and attitudes necessary to access jobs or entrepreneurial opportunities.

The service activities undertaken by the young participants over a period of 12-15 months included the labour intensive construction of a road with culverts and drifts necessary to control water run-off, the construction of a multi-purpose centre, the development of municipal food gardens, supporting the work of an under-resourced clinic running primary health education, care and counselling projects, the provision of support projects for youth-at-risk in outdoor education, and the repair of infrastructure in a conservation area.

The three organisations faced enormous challenges as they developed and implemented the youth service projects. Each was working in a new way that posed significant challenges in terms of developing a rigorous, accredited approach to skills development (rather than a short-term, ad hoc approach). And each organisation had to confront the need to provide clear strategies that would guarantee participants' access to economic activity at the conclusion of the project. Some of the organisations found the task daunting, but persevered nevertheless.

For the Umsobomvu Youth Fund the process was valuable because many assumptions about the youth service programme model could be tested in practice. Both the funder and the participating NGOs grappled with a number of difficult issues during the initial process:

- What does it take for a training programme to be accredited?
- How do NGOs engage with national development objectives?
- What is an appropriate stipend policy?
- What is a realistic anticipation of drop-out from these projects?
- What are the economic opportunities that exist for young people, and what support do they need if they are to access them?
- Does the requirement of economic opportunities preclude projects being run in very poor areas?
- Given the high levels of failure in the past with regard to young people's attempts to establish and sustain small businesses, could participation in youth service projects provide the young participants with new levels of confidence and skills that would enable ventures to succeed?

While there is considerable political pressure in South Africa to launch service projects on a large scale, there is equally strong political pressure not to 'dump funds' in projects that ultimately make no significant difference to the lives of the young people who participate in them.

The Umsobomvu Youth Fund recognises the overwhelming need for large numbers of young people to gain access to such projects. It is also aware that many more organisations and institutions need to understand and be willing to implement youth service projects. This takes time and experience.

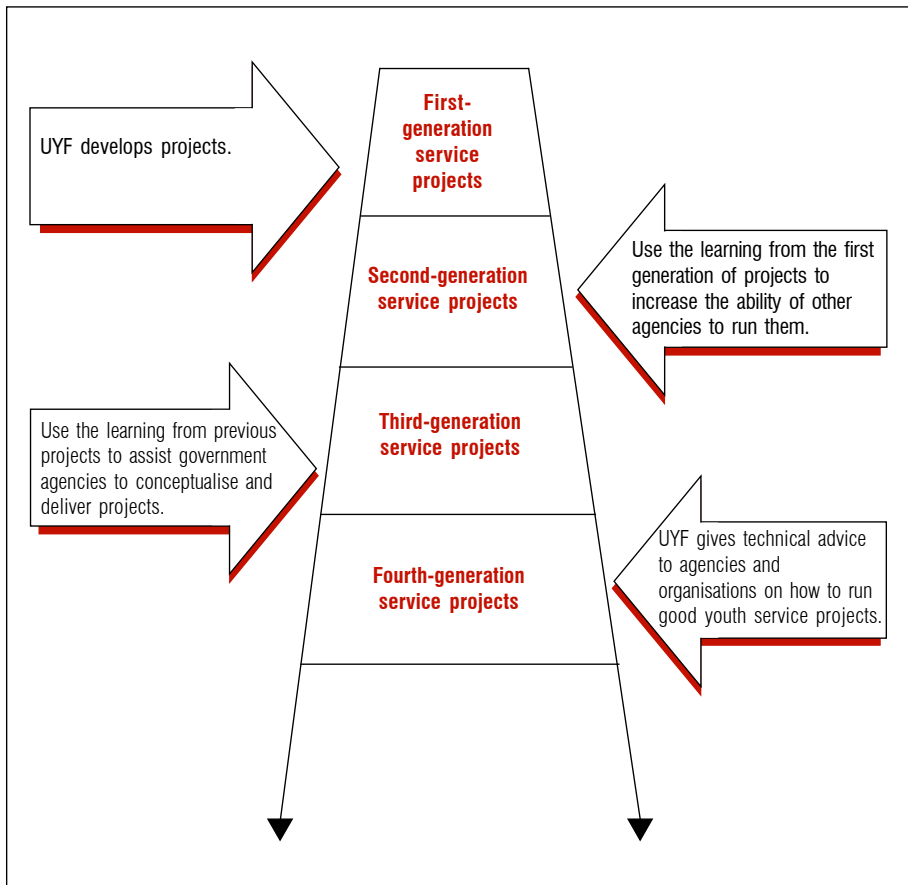
Umsobomvu's strategy, therefore, was to generate new knowledge about what works in youth service, and to use this experience to increase the opportunities and capacity for project delivery. This involved three principles:

- Learning by doing, and reflecting on this practice to build a body of knowledge about youth service for employment;
- Incrementally growing the scale of service programmes for unemployed young people; and
- Using Umsobomvu's resources to leverage wider funding from government departments for youth service, on the basis of the experience gained.

Projects are developed through a series of 'generations'. In the first generation, projects are developed using the model described above. They are implemented by a small number of agencies. The second generation involves using the learning from the first projects to increase the ability of other agencies to run them. The third generation draws on the learning from previous projects to assist government agencies to conceptualise and deliver new and larger projects. And in the fourth generation, the Umsobomvu Youth Fund gives technical advice to a wide range of agencies and organisations on how to run good youth service projects across the country.

The strategy can be illustrated as follows:

**FIGURE 1** The UYF model for taking service-for-employment programmes to a larger scale



## Getting started: The role of the funding agency

In kick-starting this strategy the Umsobomvu Youth Fund has followed four guidelines:

- **Commit to fully funding the first and second round of project delivery.**  
In the first two years of delivery, Umsobomvu has undertaken to fund all elements of the projects in order to generate knowledge of what works in youth service in the South African context.
- **Link up the project plans with the goals of public sector agencies.**  
Sectors identified by Umsobomvu as initial priorities for youth service include construction and infrastructure development, primary agriculture, primary health care, conservation and environmental care, and juvenile justice. Each of these relate to specific development objectives articulated by government around which public expenditure is planned over the next two to three years. Within the sectoral plans, Umsobomvu works with agencies to run youth service projects.
- **Identify the most appropriate intermediaries to deliver projects.**  
A major task for the Fund has been to develop criteria for choosing agencies and organisations to implement the youth service projects. Through the initial contracting process, Umsobomvu provided a substantial planning grant to each organisation which enabled the organisations to demonstrate how they would integrate the service, learning and employment components in each project, and how the project would be managed. Perhaps the most important lesson from the pilot process was that it takes time for organisations to fully understand the requirements of implementing youth service projects. Gaining this experience proved to be essential in order for organisations to participate confidently and to contribute to the learning process.
- **Support the organisations in project delivery.**  
Umsobomvu has had to play a direct and intensive support role, particularly during the first year of delivery. Whilst providing hands-on support to the projects, Umsobomvu was also playing the larger role of forging linkages and partnerships that create an enabling environment for the implementation of service projects with young people. These partnerships include working with the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs – institutions established in each economic sector to drive sector-wide training and human resources development), and with provincial and national government departments.

## The costs of building a national youth service programme

The Umsobomvu Youth Fund has recognised that there are two types of costs in the establishment of a successful national youth service programme:

- The costs of running effective youth service projects; and
- The costs of establishing an effective and sustainable youth service programme throughout the country.

The table below attempts to give an indication of the interface between the work done in the projects and the parallel efforts made to finance and develop a successful and cost-effective national youth service programme. The column on the left speaks to the direct costs that organisations incur in implementing youth service projects that aim to change the economic status of young people. The column on the right shows the work done by the Fund to create a programmatic framework and environment for youth service nationally.

**TABLE 1** Cost components of national youth service

Youth service project cost components	National youth service programme cost components
<p><b>Skills development</b> Nationally recognised (accredited) training in relation to the economic opportunities youth could access at the completion of the project. Ultimately it is hoped that this funding will be sourced from the National Skills Fund.</p> <p>Sufficient skills in the fundamentals of mathematics and communications. Ultimately it is hoped that this funding will be sourced from national and provincial education budgets.</p> <p><b>Lifeskills/personal development</b> Young people develop the personal behaviours and attitudes they require. Some of these are against national standards in areas such as citizenship, identity, and making career choices.</p>	<p><b>Development of methods, materials and information to support and expand delivery</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify emerging economic opportunities for young people, including detailed local and sectoral scans of the emerging opportunities and the implications for skills and development programmes.</li> <li>• Develop mentorship and support programmes for young people leaving youth service projects and accessing entrepreneurial support.</li> <li>• Convene and facilitate the participation of sector education and training authorities in building and developing youth service projects.</li> <li>• Agree on financing arrangements with the National Skills Fund for skills programmes in youth service.</li> <li>• Agree on financing arrangements with the National Student Financial Aid Scheme for participants who wish to proceed with their studies.</li> </ul>

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Youth service project cost components	National youth service programme cost components
<p><b>Service</b> Services activities take place within the development priorities of government departments. Budget items include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Materials for undertaking the service;</li> <li>• The supervision of young people by professional/technical people to ensure the work meets all quality standards for the sector; and</li> <li>• Where a labour cost has been allocated to projects it contributes to stipends, insurance and learning costs.</li> </ul> <p>Ultimately this funding will be drawn from government department and municipal budgets.</p> <p>The additional supervision and support by youth workers to ensure the entire project is a learning experience, is a direct cost to the Umsobomvu Youth Fund.</p>	<p><b>Development of capacities and ability for large-scale implementation of youth service programmes through multiple initiatives</b></p> <p>Develop contractual and institutional criteria for government agencies that could allocate funds to youth service projects.</p> <p>Umsobomvu must initially take overall responsibility for programme management and for ensuring exceptional quality in the projects delivered.</p> <p>Advocate at local, provincial and national level for budget streams to be allocated to youth service.</p> <p>Advocate to the public and private sectors the desirability of youth service graduates as employees.</p>
<p><b>Finance</b> Direct incentives to young people that make it possible for youth to participate in the project in regard to food, transport, childcare and clothing.</p> <p>Activities that 'give positive status' to participating youth and basic stipends are the responsibility of Umsobomvu.</p>	<p><b>Finance</b> Develop a cost benefit procedure to guide youth service programmes nationally.</p> <p>Ensure that there are norms for the cost ratio of projects and that youth service projects do not compete with or displace existing labour contracts.</p>
<p><b>Project management and administration</b> Organisations implementing youth service projects require project managers who can supervise, co-ordinate and monitor the progress of all of the above interactions against contractual agreements, and against the positive development of young people in the project.</p> <p>Scrupulous financial and narrative reports are required.</p>	<p><b>Programme management and administration</b> What kind of management is required to sustain programmes that meet the needs of public sector agencies whilst simultaneously providing the skills and economic opportunities for young people?</p> <p>Where should such management be located?</p>

This analysis suggests that the task of launching a major systemic youth service initiative that is capable of making a serious impact on youth unemployment requires substantial levels of sustained funding. At the same time, these investments only make sense when they offer young people a real opportunity to change their social and economic circumstances.

The context of youth unemployment is so difficult and the challenge of integrating young people on the periphery of society is so great, that initiatives are unlikely to succeed without sufficient support. Meaningful support does not only involve a monetary component; it also involves an investment of time, energy, skill and a commitment to knowledge development.

The ultimate aim is to resource the youth service programmes from a diversity of funding sources (eg. through matching funds) to ensure that no single agency has to bear the entire responsibility for the cost of a national youth service programme.

## Making the most of scarce resources

If the costs are high, a national youth service programme is clearly not an affordable solution to mass unemployment. Rather, youth service becomes a new and significant option in the range of programmes available to young people. This requires making strategic choices about the beneficiaries of the youth service programmes as well as how the programmes relate to economic opportunities.

Let us return to the high rate of volunteering that is manifesting itself in South Africa. There are thousands of young people volunteering in the primary health care sector, particularly in regard to the AIDS pandemic. Could it be that young people who have themselves developed some skills and experience through their volunteer efforts, and who are interested in working in the health sector, are the people for whom a youth service project would be most valuable?

Similarly, there are large numbers of young people who have worked in poverty alleviation and public works programmes such as the Working for Water programme (clearing alien vegetation for a minimal stipend). What happens next? Where do they go next in order to build on the experience they have already gained? Would these not be the people to target for youth service?

What this suggests is that young people's ability, their motivation for engaging in service, and the choices they have made to get into youth service programmes should be taken seriously as the basis for integrating them into the mainstream of society.

Where investments have already been made in the development of young people as, for example, through voluntary mentoring, short-term skills programmes or public sector short-term labour creation programmes, youth service projects may offer a further pathway that will enable young people to gain access to other initiatives such as finance for small businesses, access to higher education, participation in a learnership, or employment in the formal sector. In other words, youth service becomes a passage into more development opportunities – either in education or through employment.

**Young people's ability, their motivation and the choices they have made to get into youth service should be taken seriously as the basis for integrating them into the mainstream of society**

For example, volunteers who are keen to pursue a career in the area of health and have demonstrated their commitment and interest by volunteering in community health projects, could apply to participate in a twelve month youth service project. With the support of the Department of Health and the Health and Welfare Sector Education and Training Authority, they could achieve a nationally recognised qualification in community-based health care. At the end of the project they would be eligible for workplace training through a learnership, seek employment in health related areas, or set up a non-governmental organisation that could tender for social contracts to provide community-based care.

## Conclusion

For the first time in the history of youth service in South Africa, the Umsobomvu Youth Fund service-for-employment programme holds the possibility not only of countering unemployment but also of promoting job creation. Key principles that inform the design of the national youth service include:

**The Umsobomvu Youth Fund sees service as a means whereby young people could access identified economic opportunity**

- making learning an integral part of service;
- shaping the service activities according to government department priorities;
- providing appropriate incentives to support the participation of young people;
- selecting the sites for youth service on the basis of high needs and high potential;
- developing a culture of self-reliance in the national youth service; and
- implementing the national youth service programme through effective partnerships.

By locating youth service within South Africa's overall development policy framework, and seriously addressing the skills development needs of youth people in relation to identified economic opportunity, the Umsobomvu Youth Fund is triggering job creation initiatives such as provincial conservation plans and other regional economic opportunities. This marks a serious attempt to break new ground in terms of generating employment, and makes the programme quite distinctive in its efforts not only to counter unemployment but also to contribute to national development and economic growth.

## References

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> In South Africa, a 'learnership' refers to a method by which a person can gain a qualification while gaining workplace experience. The Department of Labour aims to have 80 000 young people involved in learnerships by March 2005.