



# GREEN JOBS FOR THE POOR: A PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT APPROACH

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This paper is part of a series commissioned by the Inclusive Development Cluster of UNDP's Poverty Group in the Bureau for Development Policy at UNDP with a view to identifying how to address various development challenges in the context of the current economic and financial crisis. To the extent employment has been shown to be central to recovery, the papers seek to explore how an employment focus can be addressed in synergy with the challenge in question.

#### **Abstract<sup>1</sup>**

Over the past few years the employment creation potential of activities beneficial to the environment has been receiving increasing attention through the term of 'green jobs'. These jobs are often understood to be those involving the implementation of measures that reduce carbon emissions or help realise alternative sources of energy use in developed economies. This paper explores the potential for governments to create "green jobs" and align poverty reduction and employment creation in developing countries with a broader set of investments in environmental conservation and rehabilitation to also preserve bio diversity, restore degraded land, combat erosion, and remove invasive aliens etc. In many cases, environmental degradation has a devastating direct effect on the poor, whether they themselves are the main cause of this degradation or not, and indications are that well designed interventions can contribute directly to the poverty-environment nexus by allowing income generated from environmental activities to ease the pressure on generating income through exploiting the environment. Environmental sector targeted public employment programmes can also be deployed to specifically address environmental concerns and create employment for the poor at the same time. The paper draws heavily on the experiences on the Working for Water programme in South Africa because of the size and longevity of the programme and the extensive research and it has been subjected to. It continues by presenting an overview of the types of environmental activities that could be included in such programmes, and explores issues relating to how the programmes are prioritised, limitations with regards to estimating the costs and benefits, and in light of this, the paper considers how different types of funding and implementation strategies and mechanisms might be deployed and/or combined to enable these investments to take place and maximise employment and environmental benefits.

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# I. Introduction

*"It is my belief that what is being accomplished will conserve our natural resources, create future national wealth and prove of moral and spiritual value, not only for those taking part, but to the rest of the country as well";*

*Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1933 addressing the Civilian Conservation Corps*

The Civilian Conservation Corps, established in 1933 as one of the New Deal programmes and which continued until 1942, provided employment to 2 million people. It planted an estimated 2-3 billion trees, controlled erosion on 40 million acres of farmland, facilitated mosquito control over 240,000 acres of land, established 711 State Parks and developed 3 million acres of land for park use (Jones 2008, Paige 1985).

The creation of Green Jobs through public employment programmes thus clearly has its precedents, especially in times of crisis. Given the severity of both the economic and environmental crises the world is facing today, the need for such public employment programmes is arguably larger than ever. Calls for a Global Green New Deal strongly emphasise the need for green investments and highlight their employment creation benefits of these investments. This paper attempts to contribute to this debate by arguing for the inclusion of environmental public employment programmes targeting the poor and unemployed which just like in the Great Depression can make huge contributions to environmental sustainability, reduction of poverty and unemployment, and mitigating the impacts of the crisis.

## II. Environment, employment and government

### A. Green Jobs

Much of the damage and destruction done to the environment that was done by humans can also be reversed by humans. And just as the activities that damage the environment have generated vast amounts of employment, the activities required to rehabilitate and conserve it will as well. Over the past few years, the employment creation potential of activities that are beneficial to the environment has been receiving increased attention. They are increasingly referred to as "Green Jobs"<sup>3</sup> and with the increased awareness about the massive risks of

<sup>3</sup>According to (ILO 2008) Green jobs reduce the environmental impact of enterprises and economic sectors ultimately to levels that are sustainable or involve jobs that conserve or rehabilitate the environment. Specifically, but not exclusively, this includes jobs that protect ecosystems and biodiversity; reduce energy, materials, and water consumption through high-efficiency strategies; de-carbonise the economy; and minimise or altogether avoid generation of all forms of waste and pollution.

global warming green jobs are quickly rising up the ranks of global political priorities<sup>4</sup>. The focus of these jobs is increasingly related to jobs that either conserve energy or help realise alternative sources of energy (UNEP 2007), with the aim of accelerating the shift to low carbon economies. However, there is a wider interpretation of the concept of green jobs that looks beyond energy issues to a broader set of environmental activities that include conservation and rehabilitation to preserve bio diversity, restore degraded land, combat erosion, remove invasive aliens etc. It is important that the potential of these investments in restoring the environment, creating employment and contributing to reducing poverty is not lost in the current focus on energy related green jobs, important though that is.

This paper will focus on environmental investments and in particular on those activities that can create employment for the poor. These initiatives will be referred to *environmental public employment*<sup>5</sup> programmes, which are programmes that provide income and employment to poor unemployed people by engaging them in activities that result in environmental rehabilitation and conservation. One reason for this focus is that with the increasing momentum that the concept of green jobs is gaining, those green jobs that will be able to offer better income and entrepreneurship opportunities will receive the most attention. But investments in the environment will also provide an opportunity to create meaningful and productive employment for the poor on a large scale, and it is important that this does not get lost in the current debates. While the focus of this paper is on these types of public employment programmes, it is recognised that these do not and cannot exist in isolation of other environmental management and conservation activities. Given the somewhat temporary nature of the employment created through public employment programmes, transition to and/or complementarity with other attempts to create sustainable livelihoods, farming and entrepreneurship opportunities are important. The manner in which they support broader environmental policies and initiatives is also critical.

## *B. The Role of Government in Creating Employment and as Custodian of the Environment*

One underlying argument of this paper is that governments have a important role to play in direct employment creation for the poor, as most evidence to date suggests that the market will only create a limited amount of employment for this group and that those who do not manage to engage in employment are likely to remain poor and marginalised until they do

<sup>4</sup>Recently, Barack Obama, Gordon Brown and Nicolas Sarkozy promised to increase investments in the creation of "Green Jobs". (Newsweek 3 November 2008, New York Times 23 Nov 2008). According to UNEP (2009 press release), the US stimulus package directs approximately \$100 billion or over 0.7 per cent of GDP towards greening the US economy: \$18 billion for clean water, flood control and environmental restoration and \$8.4 billion for transit, and \$8 billion for high-speed rail; \$4.5 billion to make federal office buildings more energy-efficient, \$30 billion for a smart power grid, advanced battery technology and other energy efficiency measures, \$20 billion in tax incentives for renewable energy and energy efficiency over the next 10 years;

\$6.3 billion for energy efficiency in multifamily housing that gets federal assistance, such as HUD-sponsored low-income housing and \$5 billion to weatherize more than 1 million homes owned by "modest-income" families.

<sup>5</sup>This paper will use both public works programmes and public employment programmes. While the use of the term public works programmes is more common, public employment programmes is preferred as it avoids the focus on infrastructure associated with the terms public works.

so (Wray 2007, Osmani 2005). The current global financial and economic crisis has initiated a re-examination of the role of the state in the economy. While this debate continues there appears to be developing a consensus for the state to play a more active role in the economy, rather than seeing its role mainly as a regulator. Specifically with regard to employment creation, the role of the State is expected to grow as the private sector is rapidly reducing their numbers of employees. Most of the government responses have centred on boosting demand through stimulus packages and thus indirectly boosting employment. Increasingly integrating environmental components into the crisis-related stimulus packages is becoming more common in recognition of the fact that apart from the global economic and financial crisis, there is also an environmental crisis that needs to be addressed and that measures to address them cannot be put off for much longer. It would appear that public employment programmes like the ones advocated in this paper could play an increasingly important role in the ways governments respond to the current crises.

Policy proposals being formulated in this regard speak of a *Global Green New Deal* (GGND) which would be a large scale, globally coordinated approach to the multiple crises that the world is facing now.<sup>6</sup> Many of the components identified as a part of such a GGND, such as waste management and recycling and “ecological infrastructure”, could be implemented through public employment programmes as advocated in this paper. Furthermore, those activities that have an infrastructure component to it, such as the ‘weatherisation’ of buildings and the installation of solar water heaters on homes could also be structured along the lines of the programmes being advocated, whereby governments may be able to subsidise part of the labour and material costs of these activities.

In respect of accelerating the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), arguments for a greater role for government are particularly relevant for those MDGs with significant positive externalities such as gender equality and environmental sustainability. Khan (2007) argues that these MDGs would require a greater proportion of public investments as individuals are unlikely to invest in the achievement of these MDGs. These public investments can be structured to maximize the employment created in the process. Investments in these MDGs can thus also contribute directly to MDG 1b which focuses on creating full employment.

In addition to the responsibility of governments to implement programmes that reduce poverty and unemployment, there is also a strong rationale for governments to ensure environmental sustainability as articulated in MDG 7. Governments are either the main custodians of the environment, responsible for policing environmental regulations and protected areas or implementing specific environmental mandates, all of which require an active role of government. And in the context of Governments as market regulators, especially for those markets that are failing, there is a need to intervene in the market for environmental and ecosystem services as these markets are still largely dysfunctional, with neither externalities nor benefits provided by the environment being properly reflected in pricing.

<sup>6</sup>The Global Green New Deal also covers public employment programmes such as Working on Water, see UNEP (2009), page 20 (e-publication page 42, 298)

The final argument for a larger role for governments to make these proposed investments is the direct link between the environment and poverty, to so-called environment-poverty nexus and the need to mitigate/address these issues. There are also instances where these issues are the basis for conflict or where addressing them can help to facilitate peace building /recovery. In many cases, environmental degradation has had a devastating direct effect on the poor, whether they themselves are the main cause of this or not. And indications are that well designed interventions can contribute directly to addressing this by allowing income generated from environmental activities to ease the pressure on generating income through exploiting the environment (Vitae Civilis 2002<sup>7</sup>).

### C. *Alternative Job Creation and Livelihood Approaches: Potential Linkages*

While this paper advocates a leadership role for governments in these public employment programmes, there may be various reasons why governments are not able to play a leadership role and undertake public employment programmes at least in the short term. In such circumstances, government may be in a better position to play a supporting role, through assisting other organisations and civil society who are in essence creating employment through rehabilitation and conservation of the environment.

Often the opposition to public employment programmes is rooted in a strong belief of focusing on market based interventions as these are seen as more sustainable in the long run. As will be pointed out later, where such markets exist and are accessible to the poor, such approaches should be considered and the role of government should focus on developing the market and enabling the poor to access and participate in these markets in a fair manner. On the one hand this would typically require investments in small business development, as well as specific technical training on the environmental area concerned, be it recycling, sustainable harvesting of forest products etc. But it may also require governments to step in to regulate or play a more active role in these markets to make them work better for the poor. Such active roles could include, using government purchasing power to stabilise demand as well as subsidies, pricing strategies and other interventions.

The tree planting activities of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya is a good example of what could arguably be a large public employment programme implemented by civil society. As it stands, it is done mostly without the government, and is based on volunteering rather than the provision of income. In such circumstances there would still be the possibilities for governments to support these programmes, even if there is no clear policy intent for using public employment programmes to create employment as its activities generate a

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