INSTITUTE FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE
RESEARCH POLICY ADVOCACY

SUBMISSION

Initial Comments on Presidency draft anti-poverty strategy:
Key departmental interventions to achieve NDP targets by 2030

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1. Introduction

We welcome this opportunity to comment on proposals from the National Working Group on Poverty Alleviation. On the one hand it is important that government is opening up this discussion for engagement. On the other, very little time has been given for input, on wide-ranging matters which have clearly been under consideration in government for quite some time.

Further, a document has not been circulated, only slides, which are rather cryptic and unclear on certain issues. Nevertheless we will do our best within these constraints to make constructive input in the hope that this will lead to deeper engagement on the issues at hand. These comments are therefore necessarily brief, and provisional, until we have been able to look at a detailed document, which will enable us to comment more fully.

2. General comments

It is to be welcomed that the input attempts to integrate different facets of government anti-poverty interventions into a holistic strategy. Also welcome is asking what can be done differently to ensure that these interventions are high-impact, and massified, and beginning to critically reflect on why previous efforts have not reached the critical mass that is required, given the massive challenges that need to be confronted.

Importantly, the input states:

> *R1.3 trillion has not adequately resulted in poverty outcomes* i.e. *eradicating poverty* and breaking the cycle of generational poverty. *Extreme Fragmentation* results in duplication with varying degrees of focus, scale, budget and impact…*Small scale interventions that do not match the scale of need* are implemented by Departments, thus benefiting a small number of people or households." (Our emphasis).

In relation to this important statement the question arises: what is fundamentally different or new in this strategy that different outcomes will be achieved, and what is the plan for implementation and sequencing? Have similar plans not been proposed before? What is the diagnosis of the nature of the problem that underpins this strategic shift? And what does the international and local evidence tell us about the type of state interventions that are likely to succeed in achieving these desired objectives?

It is welcome that the strategy sets itself ambitious goals, including to eliminate poverty by 2030, and to rapidly eliminate hunger (at least child hunger), although we will argue that some of the goals set could be more ambitious.

However there are many questions about the appropriateness of the modalities proposed to achieve these goals, and lack of clarity on a number of the proposals, which are either ambiguous, or left at too great a level of generality. Critically, we raise fundamental questions about the lack of a viable strategy to adequately resource the required interventions.

Once a document is released for comment it will provide a basis for civil society and the research community to engage and propose changes to the strategy as well as additional interventions to help to address this massive challenge.

Our main area of detailed comment at this point, in Section 3 below, is on social security related interventions. However we briefly comment here on a few aspects of the slides that raise concerns.

These are only initial comments, and we would want to comment in more detail once a document is made available.

2.1. General approach to eliminating poverty and definitional issues

In slide 4 it is proposed that,

> South Africa adopts a Presidential NO POVERTY GUARANTEE, which is a national commitment that no household and or individual will live below the poverty line by 2030 in South Africa.

This presumably refers to all those living below the national poverty lines, as defined by Stats SA. This is a welcome and significant commitment.

However, a different concept is later used in slide 15 which refers to "the eradication of *extreme poverty* by 2030" (our emphasis). Colleagues are no doubt aware that there is a sharp debate in international circles, as well as South Africa, as to the distinction between eliminating poverty, and eliminating *extreme* poverty, the latter commonly referring to those living below the *international* poverty line of approximately $2.50 per day. There needs to be clarity on what is being spoken about here.

This is further confused by the statement in slide 4 that, "members of households in the *bottom 40%* [will] have access to a comprehensive set of interventions that create pathways for households and individuals to exit out of poverty" (our emphasis).

This benchmark of 40% appears to be an arbitrary measure given that around 55% of the South African population lives in poverty. On what basis are as many as 15% of the population living in poverty excluded from these anti-poverty interventions? This runs against the stated goal of eliminating poverty.

In any event, the numbers living in poverty, as we have seen in recent years, are fluid and vary depending on various conditions, as people exit and enter into poverty. So all those living in poverty should be covered based on objective benchmarks, rather than interventions aimed at an arbitrary number, which excludes intended beneficiaries. We have seen the dangers of such an approach with the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant which, by setting an arbitrary cap, has ended up excluding up to half the intended beneficiaries. More on this below.

It is proposed that a consistent definition of poverty eradication is used throughout, using the official statistics defining the scope of poverty in South Africa, namely all those falling under the Upper-Bound Poverty Line (UBPL).

2.2. Gender and the Care economy

There is no mention of proposed interventions or policy related to carers or the care economy - this lack of focus on support for carers (especially accompanied by referenced work conditionalities for social assistance, see below) will inevitably disadvantage women in poverty alleviation interventions. This blind spot in the strategy is surprising given the extent to which the Covid-19 crisis has focused attention on both the critical role played by the care economy in society, as well as the disproportionate impact the polycrisis has had on women in general, and carers in particular.

It is proposed that this question be given serious consideration in the strategy and that a package of interventions be developed to ensure gender equity in poverty alleviation

outcomes, including by supporting those doing unpaid care work and recognising the role of the care economy.

2.3. Resourcing the anti-poverty strategy

There is a disconnect between the important notion of ramping up impact, and massifying anti-poverty interventions, with the excessively restrictive approach to financing the strategy. While more effective spending, and better coordination can go some way towards achieving these objectives, it is obvious that the strategy needs proper resourcing if it is going to have any hope of succeeding.

A meaningful budgeting strategy must be based on an assessment of the cost of meeting priority needs and programmes (this would be the case in a real zero-based budgeting exercise), rather than squeezing programmes into pre-defined, narrow budget parameters which exclude the possibility of the level of resourcing required for success.

An obvious example of the inherent contradiction in the approach being taken is evident with the public employment programmes. The strategy, correctly, calls for the ramping up of public employment schemes, proposing a doubling from 1 million to 2 million opportunities a year. Yet there is no proposal for the releasing of additional resources to achieve this objective. The current context in which the Presidential Employment Service budget will be cut, from 2024 onwards, further highlights this contradiction.

Numerous other examples can be cited where successful pursuit of the programmes in the strategy require a major expansion in budget resources. Yet there is no overarching discussion of the need to provide the budgetary resources to make the strategy a success. Indeed, there is the suggestion in various places that resources will largely come from reprioritization, departmental underspend, and recouping of resources from fruitless expenditure and corruption.

This strategy is set out on the last slide (slide 20) which suggests that "South Africa does not have a resource shortage problem; but rather a resource utilisation problem." While adequate resources exist in our society at large – with extreme levels of inequality – these are not necessarily mobilised and spent by the state. Without the state mobilising and spending additional resources the outlined strategy is just words on paper. Although efficiencies in spending can no doubt be improved, this cannot be the only or even main element of the resourcing strategy.

As is well known, the reprioritisation and cutbacks that have taken place over the last few years have come at the expense of a number of programmes related to addressing poverty. Budget-driven cutbacks in the SRD grant programme for example have led to over 2.5 million of the poorest South Africans being excluded from the grant over the last year. Many other examples of the devastating impact of cutbacks on the poor could be cited. An overly restrictive fiscal stance not only deprives resources for critical programmes, but hollows out the capacity precisely needed for better coordination and effectiveness (often also leading to excessive reliance on consultants to perform state functions).

Therefore it is proposed that the anti-poverty strategy needs to have an honest and realistic assessment of the resources required to make it succeed, and a dedicated costing of all its sub-elements, and the overall allocation required. If this requires mobilising additional

resources, as is most likely the case, then progressive ways of achieving this must be included in the strategy.

2.4. Employment strategy

A central plank of the anti-poverty strategy is the focus on creating employment. This focus is naturally critical, given the close link between poverty and unemployment. However the proposals in the slides raise many questions on how this impact will be achieved, in light of the deep structural underpinnings of unemployment, and trends since 2010, when the NDP set a target of 6% unemployment by 2030, and net new employment of 11 million jobs- a target we have been far from achieving, even before the Covid-19 crisis (only around 3 million net new jobs have been created since 2010).

A serious discussion of the proposed employment strategy would require a far more detailed analysis than we are able to go into here, as well as more detail than is contained in the slides. However a few initial thoughts include the following:

- The strategy aims to create 6.5 million jobs by 2030. Assuming these are net new jobs, there needs to be a deep reflection on the underlying structural drivers of employment trends in the South African economy, and how these would be reversed by the proposed interventions.
- In addition to the resourcing questions raised above around funding public employment, there would also need to be greater clarity as to whether 2 million 'opportunities' constitute 2 million jobs, with greater detail as to where these would be located and over what period.
- The proposed interventions in the private sector, including for MSMEs, are intended to create 4 million jobs by 2030. Questions arise as to what interventions are proposed that would re-industrialise the economy, deal with growing financialisation etc. Also raised is what evidence exists that employment can be created in the MSME sector on such a large scale, without reflecting on the very limited success of previous efforts in this regard. NDP projections that 90% of new jobs would come from SMMEs have failed to materialise.
- Issues around quality of employment are also of concern. Employment creation must avoid an increase in precarious work, and should be of decent quality, if it is to enable poverty alleviation. Otherwise we will see an increase in working poverty. Growing precarity is already a trend which is contributing to poverty. The emphasis on deregulation, and promotion of gig work which is highly precarious, raises serious concerns.
- The international evidence suggests that structural reforms combined with deregulation, which remain a central focus of government's strategy, are core elements of a neoliberal economic prescription that has led to job shedding rather than employment creation. See, for example, the work of Dani Rodrik in this regard.
- A proposal to promote migration of skilled South African workers to the global market, seems strange in that it appears to actively promote the brain drain, when we need to raise the skills profile of our workforce. Rather we need plans to attract South Africans, and foreign nationals, to plug critical skills gaps.
- No clarity is given on how 500 000 new NPO sector jobs will be created, given that there have been attempts to withdraw existing funding, in Gauteng for example. Where will these jobs be created, and what additional funding is envisaged?

It is proposed that government outlines an employment strategy that answers in far greater detail questions, such as those posed above, and indicates how the proposed strategy differs from previous approaches which have failed to secure the desired results.

2.5. Hunger

The challenge of hunger in South Africa is serious and endemic. The strategy acknowledges this, but we believe underestimates the scale of the challenge, and is not sufficiently ambitious in its proposals. In Slide 16 it cites the "size of the hunger challenge" as *2.1 million households*. This figure, also cited in other government documents, is a significant undercount of hunger recorded by Stats SA and other sources. A 2023 report by Stats SA on hunger estimates that *20% of households or 3.72 million households* have inadequate access to food.

This finding is in line with a 2023 Wits University study which found that *1 in 5* South African households are regularly sending a family member out to beg for food.

We believe that in line with the commitment that no household or individual should live in poverty, it naturally follows that there should be a commitment to totally eradicate hunger. Such an approach was successfully pursued by President Lula of Brazil from 2003, after he adopted a 'zero hunger' strategy, which brought over 20 million Brazilians out of poverty, and removed Brazil from the international 'hunger map'.

While laudable, therefore, it is inadequate to propose as the government strategy does, to only focus on eliminating child hunger.

We propose that the strategy be revised to set as a goal the elimination of hunger - a South African version of the 'zero hunger' strategy.

3. Social security, the SRD, and Basic Income

It is welcome that the strategy proposes to build on the SRD grant, and to introduce a Basic Income Support grant. This is a recognition of the urgent need for a permanent form of income support for adults, given the extent of hunger, poverty, and unemployment in the country.

However there are a number of statements and references in the document that are quite worrying, reinforced by some statements made in the first civil society consultation that took place on 1 June 2023.

These aspects include:

- A focus limited to supporting unemployed adults, thus excluding caregivers (who are currently supported by the SRD grant, although not looking for formal employment), and potentially the discourage unemployed;
- An excessive focus on work conditionalities for receipt of the grant, and the 'strengthening of targeting', which suggests a narrowing, not broadening of income support (see below);
- Linked to this, an apparent lack of concern for the large scale exclusion of beneficiaries which narrow targeting entails, and which is currently taking place on a large scale;
- A perspective that combination of registries and databases will lead to a consolidation and rationalisation of social grants - inherently pointing to the logic of once again

promoting a household grant - a notion that has been discredited as unviable and undesirable for South Africa (see below);
- Apart from a vague reference to Basic Income Support, no real engagement with proposals for a Basic Income Grant, widely supported in society, including by the governing party. These discussions cannot therefore be considered to constitute consultation on the Basic Income Grant;
- References to a task team working on proposals for Basic Income Support, which has had no engagement with civil society despite undertakings following a meeting with the President (and pending a meeting scheduled shortly) that such engagements would take place.

We deal with the need for an inclusive process in the next section. In relation to the first four elements listed above, we are of the view that they are contrary to the overwhelming thrust of international and local evidence and need to be fundamentally rethought. The need for an inclusive form of income support, and the problems of exclusion have been well documented, and we believe that officials have access to sufficient material in this regard. We are happy to provide more detail if needed.

We limit our focus below to the two elements which appear to be increasingly raising their head, namely:
- The focus on tight work conditionalities being attached to social grants;
- The notion of rationalising social grants based on consolidated databases and registries, including the possibility of establishing a household grant.

We rely here mainly on the research conducted by independent experts, although the Institute for Economic Justice and other researchers in civil society have done extensive work on social grants, basic income support, and related matters, which reinforce the findings below.

3.1. Attaching work conditionalities to social grants

Active labour market measures can play an important role in assisting entrants to the labour market access work, upskill, etc. But the evidence strongly suggests that attaching work conditionalities to grants creates a range of adverse impacts. This is particularly true in the South African context, as reflected in two studies cited below.

Proposal for the extension, redesign and repurposing of the SRD for the twin goals of poverty and unemployment reduction.[1]

An extensive study conducted by Orkin et al., published in November 2022, *inter alia* consider the impacts of placing job search related conditions on grants, drawing on international and local evidence. Having reviewed the evidence they conclude:

> "We recommend placing as few conditions on access to the grant … as possible."
>
> "There is no strong evidence that small grants would discourage job search and considerable evidence that they encourage job search. Government should focus on programmes for the population who are already actively looking for work, rather than spending funds on creating additional incentives to encourage the group of people who are not already searching to become active in the labour market. Services targeted at active jobseekers are likely to have the highest marginal benefit in increasing employment. It is likely that the supply of services will not be sufficient

to serve all job seekers who are already keenly looking for work and there are not enough jobs for them. Money spent on discouraged job seekers is less likely to yield increased employment than money spent on active jobseekers and should not be a priority above serving those actively searching for work."

"Encouraging people who are not looking for work for good reason to begin searching would dilute the pool of active jobseekers … if the grant requires jobseekers who are not able to start work, or live far away from where firms are recruiting to apply for jobs… firms will have to incur more costs to screen the applicants to jobs they post on the platform. This may deter firms from using sayouth.mobi for recruitment. There is evidence from higher income countries on some benefits of encouraging discouraged job seekers to look for work but this evidence does not apply well to the South African context. In labour markets where most people who want to work are employed, encouraging more people to search for work can result in increased employment because there are many firms looking to fill vacancies. By contrast, in South Africa there are many people who are actively looking for work and cannot find jobs."

"Conditions to encourage job seekers to actually find work are difficult to set, monitor and implement without generating unintended adverse consequences…Conditioning the SRD on job search may encourage people who are currently inactive in the labour market to engage in search but these people would be unlikely to find a job... Flooding the market with people who are searching for work but are not able to take up work may discourage firms from hiring, and in the longer term, discourage jobseekers from searching."

South Africa IMF Staff Report for the 2023 Article IV Consultation[2]

The conclusions of Orkin et al. are broadly supported by a recently released report from the IMF. Despite the IMF appearing to be in favour, in general, of attaching work conditionalities to grants, the IMF report on South Africa concedes that in the South African context such an approach is likely to have unintended and adverse consequences, including discouraging workers further, forcing them to take low-quality jobs with reduced earnings, and increasing social discontent:

"In the context of South Africa with structural unemployment and high inequality, job search requirements should be designed to avoid the pitfalls of a heavy-handed monitoring program. Job search monitoring reduces efficiency costs associated with an unconditional grant system like the SRD and is more cost-effective than other ALMPs such as job training (mainly due to lower staffing requirements). Literature consistently finds that job search monitoring and benefit sanctions reduce unemployment duration and increase job entry in the short term. However, increased job search monitoring can cause workers to give up on job search altogether and sanctions for insufficient job search can push the unemployed to take lower quality jobs with lower life-time earnings (Marinescu, 2017). For example, in Switzerland, benefit sanctions lead to a 10 percent reduction in unemployment duration, but also resulted in a 6 percent earnings reduction over the two years after the warning for a benefit sanction (Arni et al., 2013). Furthermore, stringent requirements on employment conditionality could increase social discontent amongst the poor and unemployed and negatively impact the long-term labour force participation rates (McVicar, 2020). An example is the British JSA, where

reinforced job search requirements and monitoring resulted in a 5 percent decrease in the probability of working up to four years after the start of unemployment and increased the likelihood of receiving disability benefits by about 3 percent (Petrongolo, 2009). Finally, job search monitoring increases the competition for the limited local labour market opportunities and could create displacement effects, with a lower job finding rate for those who do not participate in the program. Hence, stricter monitoring and enforcement might not result in an increase in job finding or reduce unemployment in the economy as a whole."

3.2. Rationalising social grants based on consolidated databases and registries, and establishing a household grant

There are numerous references in the slides, as well as comments by officials in the consultation, to the need for a consolidation of databases and beneficiaries, elimination of false inclusions, tightening targeting to ensure those above the poverty line don't receive grants, and an inference that some households are receiving too many grants, and therefore there needs to be a consolidation of grants.

This suggests a logic of narrower targeting and greater exclusions, as well as the possibility of reintroducing the discredited idea of a household grant. This is extremely worrying. The international evidence both documents the high level of exclusions that targeting entails, and also the problems experienced with the notion of household registries, including in Brazil where this practice was applied.

On the notion of household grants and household registries, Orkin et al, having considered the Brazilian experience conclude the following[3].

> "We do not recommend a grant targeted at households in the medium term. Targeting the grant to households in this way is a major undertaking that will be costly and time-consuming to set up and maintain and may not transfer well to the South African context given our history of migrant labour and "stretched" households… It is likely to take time, extensive funding, and very strong local capacity to set up a household targeting system. It seems unfeasible to set this system up in less than a couple of years. Bolsa Familia took ten years to set up, including the establishment of offices in each municipality to regularly survey and assess households and their assets. It relies on very strong municipal infrastructure. Brazil also faced major issues during the first years of its implementation, in particular with collection of data..."
>
> " Removing SRD grants without an alternative system in place would remove beneficial impacts from individuals currently receiving them…(there is) extremely strong international evidence that cash transfers have benefits in reducing hunger, improving dietary diversity and preventing households using detrimental coping strategies. It also outlines that cash transfers can encourage job search and enable self-employment."
>
> "In addition, household grants may face difficulties in households where there are difficult intra-household dynamics.
>
> - Allocating grants to the household may prevent household members leaving if they would lose grant income. This would be a particular concern if household members faced domestic violence. It would be an even worse

concern if the Child Support Grant and Family Grant were rolled into one and controlled by an abusive household head, making it difficult for people leaving the household to take children with them.

- Households may not share resources efficiently internally. With an individual grant, individuals receiving grants can still pool resources if they want to, but if they receive their own grant, they can choose not to if they deem this optimal for them..."

They also identify the following negatives in introducing such a grant:

- The additional data collection required may induce considerable costs.
- The programme would also need to verify self-reported data against bank data.
- There is a strong possibility of corruption in the process of determining if a household is eligible.
- The efficiency gains of the Family Grant rely on grant eligibility and grant amounts being based on the household's most recent monthly income. However, it is close to impossible to measure income so regularly.
- Collectively, these challenges point to a considerable risk of substantial targeting errors.

The IEJ and civil society partners have also documented a range of other problems with the notion of a household or family grant replacing individual grants, in a submission to government.

Comments in the consultation that it is problematic that you find households in South Africa with multiple grants seem to promote the logic of consolidation of grants, but miss the point that different grants are intended to achieve different objectives: a poor household with a child support grant, an old persons grant, a disability grant, and an SRD grant for example does not suggest that the social grant system is not working – on the contrary it demonstrates that the system is able to support the child, the old person, the disabled person, and the adult without an income.

Remove one or more of these grants, and all those needing support in the household will suffer, as specific grants have to stretch to support the entire household, and those grants are no longer able to serve their designated purpose. Indeed this is what has happened in the past with the CSG and OAP in particular without basic income support for adults being in place. The intention is therefore to expand income support, not to erode it. Any restructuring of the social security system has to address these realities, and take forward the commitment in Section 27 of the Constitution to ensure that everyone has access to social security, including appropriate social assistance for those who are unable to support themselves and their dependents.

4. We need a carefully sequenced strategy that arrests the current crisis and changes the economic trajectory

We need to go beyond a list of multiple activities that are easy to put down on paper, but unachievable without a strategy to address the immediate crisis. We should design an approach to sequencing these measures which have an immediate impact in reversing the blockages to progress, thus allowing for greater headway in implementing deeper interventions which advance structural transformation in the medium term.

The notion of *Stabilise, Stimulate, Structurally Transform* helps to think about how such a strategy could work - see here for a description of such a strategy - although the nature of the crisis has developed and deepened since this was written, and the strategy would therefore now need to incorporate new elements.

We don't have the luxury of time. The country needs rapid, high-impact interventions in the next couple of years given the nature and depth of our crisis. Therefore sequencing of short-term, high-impact measures with deeper structural change needs to be carefully thought through if it is to have the desired impact.

In sum such a strategy would aim to:
Stabilise - Targeted interventions would aim to stabilise crisis hit communities, economic sectors, and infrastructure. Such interventions range from rolling out basic income to combat hunger and poverty (and promote economic activity in struggling communities); to targeted measures to rescue and stabilise struggling economic sectors; to interventions to protect and stabilise social and economic infrastructure, both through security interventions, as well as measures to stabilise critical state owned enterprises and government departments. Such a package of measures would help to build confidence for deeper structural transformation, and reverse the downward spiral which is doing so much damage to communities, the economy, and society. With the necessary political will and resources, with the support of society, and with carefully targeted interventions, such a package of measures could make significant progress over the relatively short term.

Stimulate - Combined with the above, the strategic use of macro-economic and other instruments should aim to stimulate the economy, and reverse conditions of low growth and economic stagnation. A serious stimulus package would combine fiscal, monetary, and investment policy interventions to shift us onto a new growth path, using a range of economic tools at our disposal. These would be deliberately targeted at promoting employment generating activities and sectors, investment in infrastructure, and social investments with significant multipliers. Aspects of the stabilisation programme above, such as the rolling out of basic income, and support measures for targeted economic sectors, would form important elements of this stimulus.

Structurally transform - The above measures will only be sustainable if they are combined with interventions to structurally transform and diversify our economy. By its nature however structural transformation will take time, and therefore needs to be combined with more rapid, high-impact interventions, such as those outlined above. Key to structural transformation will be a package of measures to reverse deindustrialisation of our economy, promote economic diversification, and localisation, and counter financialisation - all of this is necessary to promote jobs and balanced growth. Building blocks of elements of such a strategy, including sector plans, local procurement etc., are already part of government policies, but can only have the desired effect if they are combined with the appropriate macroeconomic policies, to give them the necessary momentum and impact.

5. The Way Forward

We appreciate the opportunity to comment.

Going forward it would be important to ensure that:

- Draft documents (beyond the slides) are shared in advance to give the opportunity to comment properly,

- That the process is inclusive of key civil society actors, and
- A process of proper engagement is initiated.

In terms of the discussions on basic income:

- There has been no engagement with civil society by the task team on basic income. This needs to take place urgently, as budget, policy, and legislative processes require this matter to be expedited within the next couple of months.
- Commitments following the engagement with the President in January 2022 to take forward discussions on basic income have not been honoured. The Presidency has undertaken that engagement with the relevant government officials would take place before the next engagement with the President, currently scheduled for 4 July 2023. This therefore needs to be urgently arranged, so that we can report back to the President in the forthcoming meeting.

6. Endnotes

1. Orkin, K., Goldman, M., Kreft, B., Fairall, D., Cahill, A., Hlelaa, N., Chitke, A., Woolard, I., and Leibbrand, M. 2022. Proposal for the extension, redesign and repurposing of the SRD for the twin goals of poverty and unemployment reduction. 22 November 2022, 70-72 (Accessed on: 21 June 2023).
2. International Monetary Fund. 2023. South Africa IMF Staff Report for the 2023 Article IV Consultation, 5 May 2023, 127-128. (Accessed on: 21 June 2023).
3. Orkin et al., op cit pp 46-49.

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