

Decent Employment and Poverty Alleviation for Socio-Economic Development and Its Implications for The Well-Being of the Citizenry in South Africa

By

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Abstract

The need for governments and private employers to adequately provide decent work within the economy for all its inhabitants cannot be over-emphasized. This imperative is even more important since most obtainable work have been characterized by many detrimental dimensions which can be considered as constituting 'indecent employment'. From the viewpoint of human development, the paper examines how 'decent employment' can serve as an antidote to poverty. Thus, decent employment can positively affect both material and non-material social development which include health, education, social security, food security and overall well-being. The present paper is borne out of the desire to empower the average South African citizen in specifically attaining an improved socio-economic living standard. This paper employs a qualitative, thematic analysis of selected reported cases of perceived 'indecent' or non-meaningful employment from both informal and formal sectors' Additionally, this paper highlights instances in which employees have experienced challenges in getting 'dignified' or decent employments as a result of casualization, outsourcing, short-term contracts, and temporary employments. This interpretive, qualitative approach was adopted to put forward a somewhat empirical evidence of the potential beneficial effect of decent employment on human and socio-economic development. The main contribution of this paper is that it foregrounds the need for decent employment of the workforce in addressing the three-pronged societal challenges of unemployment, inequality and poverty. The paper posits that decent employment significantly contributes to national socio-economic development and poverty alleviation or eradication.

Keywords: *Decent Employment, Poverty Alleviation, Socio-Economic Development, Casualization, Outsourcing, Short-term contract, Temporary Employment.*

Introduction

'Indecent' employment practices lead to inadequacy in the sense that a seemingly employed individual is unable to meet the minimum needs for a minimum standard of living. In order to fulfil societal obligations in areas such as health, education, social security, and food security, productive employment is always a means of achieving material as well as non-material social development (ILO, 2011). In this paper, and consistent with the conceptualisation of ILO (1999), Deranty & MacMillan (2012), and United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 8 (UN SDG-8)(sdgs.un.org/goals/goal8), 'decent employment' or 'decent work' is seen as *'the desire of people in the world of work (whether formal or informal) to be adequately financially, materially or otherwise 'compensated' sufficiently to cater for their personal well-being and also to be able to make positive contributions to society therefrom'*. Furthermore, in this write up, the terminology or phrase 'decent employment' and '*decent work*' are used interchangeably to refer to the same concept.

Meaningful or decent work has long been widely acknowledged as one of the main avenues available to persons through which they can escape poverty. Thus, as Narayan, Chambers, Shah, and Petesch (2000) aver, decent employment should provide adequate and secure standard of living amongst its other monetary and psycho-social benefits. They go on to argue that productive work that helps workers to avert poverty is a universal desire of workers (Narayan, et al, 2000). Whilst it would appear, in some instances, that people are employed, a closer examination would reveal that a significant proportion of such employments are casual, out-sourced, short-term and/or temporary. This situation is compounded when one adds the nature of employment in the informal sector where cases of inhumane treatments and employment insecurity abound (Bell & Newitt, 2010). Thus, it can be argued that poverty alleviation through employment goes beyond the mere provision of work opportunities to include providing decent employment that address the negative elements and factors associated with work. It is this holistic approach, it is believed, that would lead to socio-economic development and alleviate or eradicate poverty.

The South African employment environment has not been spared the challenges highlighted above in spite of the 'democratisation' of the political system since 1994. Some of the challenges can be traced back to the residual effects of the prior, pre-democratic socio-economic dispensation which had institutionalised racial inequalities and disparities in employment. To address these, the post-apartheid government has attempted to enact various labour or employment legislation. The impact of these legislation on employment and socio-economic development have been varied. A visible short-coming of these efforts is reflected by the high rate

of unemployment amongst the youth, increasing casualization and outsourcing of employment. One argument that has been advanced for this continued dire state of affairs in employment in South Africa is that the levers of control of the employment landscape in South Africa is yet to be 'democratised'. As a corollary to this argument is the need for both the government and private sector employers to provide meaningful, honourable and well-paying jobs that are able to meet the basic socio-economic needs of workers. Jobs that are not able to meet these needs end up having the unintended effects of engendering negative health and nutritional outcomes, and of further impoverishing the population. The increasing general population poverty rate in the country has been correlated to wage inequality and burgeoning rate of dependency of the population on government's social welfare schemes (Isaacs, 2016).

Venter and Levy (2014) identify high crime rates, social unrest, racial and gender disparities as additional factors that contribute to the malaise of indecent work in South Africa. It has been documented that these disparities negatively affect working persons and their families and the national economy. The absence of a national minimum wage policy has not helped the situation either. Even though the Basic Conditions of Employment Act of 1997 allow some vulnerable sectors to set minimum wage. Recognizing that the minimum wage alone cannot solve the nation's wage inequality or poverty problems, the National Minimum Wage level must be cognizant of the 'living wage' necessary for a dignified life (Isaacs, 2016). Based on the low-earning profiles of majority of South African families, it is clear that current wage levels do not meet the needs of families and are not sufficient to raise families out of poverty. In the bottom half of households with a wage earner, wage income constitutes the primary income source (Isaacs, 2016).

The efforts by the government, since 1994, to address these issues from a macroeconomic policy standpoint have included the implementation of the National Development Plan and the establishment of the Decent Work Commission (Venter & Levy, 2014). Unfortunately, in spite of these initiatives, the economy of South Africa has continued to experience low level growth and a persistent increase in unemployment as a result of numerous rigidities of economic and employment reforms (Johannes, 2012). Having productive employment is essential for achieving fair globalization and reducing poverty (ILO, 2015). The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2015) has developed a community of work agenda that centres on job creation, workers' rights, social protection, and social dialogue, with gender equality as one of the crosscutting objectives

(ILO, 2015). It has become a universal human right to be able to work decently, and has been incorporated into major human rights declarations.

As stated earlier, while many efforts have been made, little has been accomplished due to the high levels of unemployment. The rise in joblessness in South Africa has not been addressed. This situation somewhat negates any efforts toward ensuring decent employment because people have to be gainfully employed, in the first place, before concerns over decent employment can have relevance. Thus, for example, the scrutinization of the 'fairness' or otherwise of a contract of employment or an analysis of the quality of the work experience can only make sense if individuals have a job to begin with.

With the above in mind, therefore, this paper attempts to explore how decent employment can be examined by first addressing the concerns over widespread poverty, disempowerment and racial inequalities that pervade the South African society. The questions to be answered are:

- In what way can decent work contribute to alleviating or eradicating poverty in South Africa?
- Has historical racial inequality negatively affected the possibility of attaining decent employment for majority of South Africans?
- What is the likely impact of decent employment on the socio-economic development of South Africa?
- What implications will all these initiatives considered together have for the well-being of South Africans?

Aim

The aim of this paper is to examine if decent work can contribute to alleviating or eradicating poverty and thereby to improving the socio-economic development of society and the well-being of individuals. Along with this aim, an attempt would be made to look at how the legislative efforts pertaining to decent wages, safe working conditions and the protection of labour right have fared in shaping decent work in the country.

This paper hopes to determine whether decent work can eradicate poverty among South Africans by providing a sustainable income for an average resident and his or her family. To achieve this, however, financial investment in citizens, particularly the most vulnerable ones among the people

in South Africa, should be a priority to improve their standard of living. Studying this issue relates to improving the effectiveness of government policy to deliver decent work that includes decent wages and salaries as well as ensuring safe working conditions, providing job security and protecting labour's rights. By completing the study, it aims to produce fruitful work for women and men that promotes good health, food security, affordable education, and human dignity. Programs and public policy interventions that will increase decent employment in South Africa should continue to be made available to everyone within the country.

A Brief Literature Review: 'Decent Employment': An Overview

As stated in article 23 section 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations' approach to full employment and decent work calls for every individual to have a good job, to freely choose employment, to enjoy equitable and just working conditions, and to be protected from unemployment (UN Report, 2007). The definition of decent employment recognizes that employment is a catalyst for more than just income, but also for dignity, family stability, peace within the community, and economic growth that allows for more productive jobs and employment (Cohen & Moodley, 2012). According to Wilson (1996), obtaining stable and secure work is related to physical and mental well-being as well as greater cohesion in communities (Paul & Moser, 2009; Swanson, 2012). The aspirations of people are best summed up by decent work. This includes productive and equitable work, a safe working environment and social safety nets for families, opportunities for people to achieve their potential and participate in society, freedom of speech, organization and participation in the decisions affecting their life, and equity for women and men (ILO, 2011).

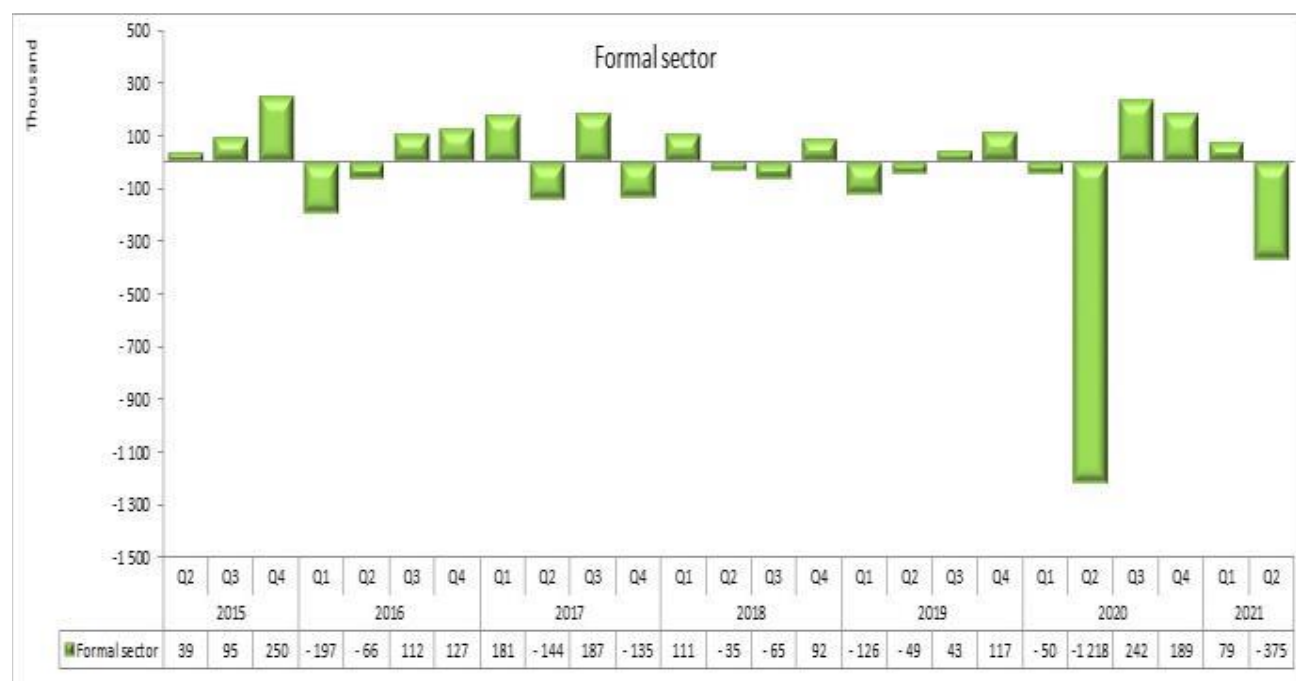
As identified by the International Labour Organization, there are basic principles of decent work that need to be adhered to, such as: enhancing the standards and rights of employees at the workplace, protecting rights, dignity, equality, and fair labour practices in the workplace; enhancement of job quality through the creation of new jobs and the improvement of pay prospects; the eradication of poverty and inequality demands; the creation and expansion of collective security and social safeguards; promoting public discussion and negotiation between employees, employers, and the government (ILO, 2021). These outlined principles of the International Labour Organisation establish a connection between decent employment and poverty alleviation or eradication in societies. In support of this the South African government has pledged its commitment to the attainment of decent work and sustainable livelihoods for all workers and has undertaken to mainstream decent work imperatives into national development strategies. It is imperative for policy makers to find solutions that help improve the living conditions

of their citizens. It is vital to develop strategies to improve the socio-economic environment as part of the campaign for decent work.

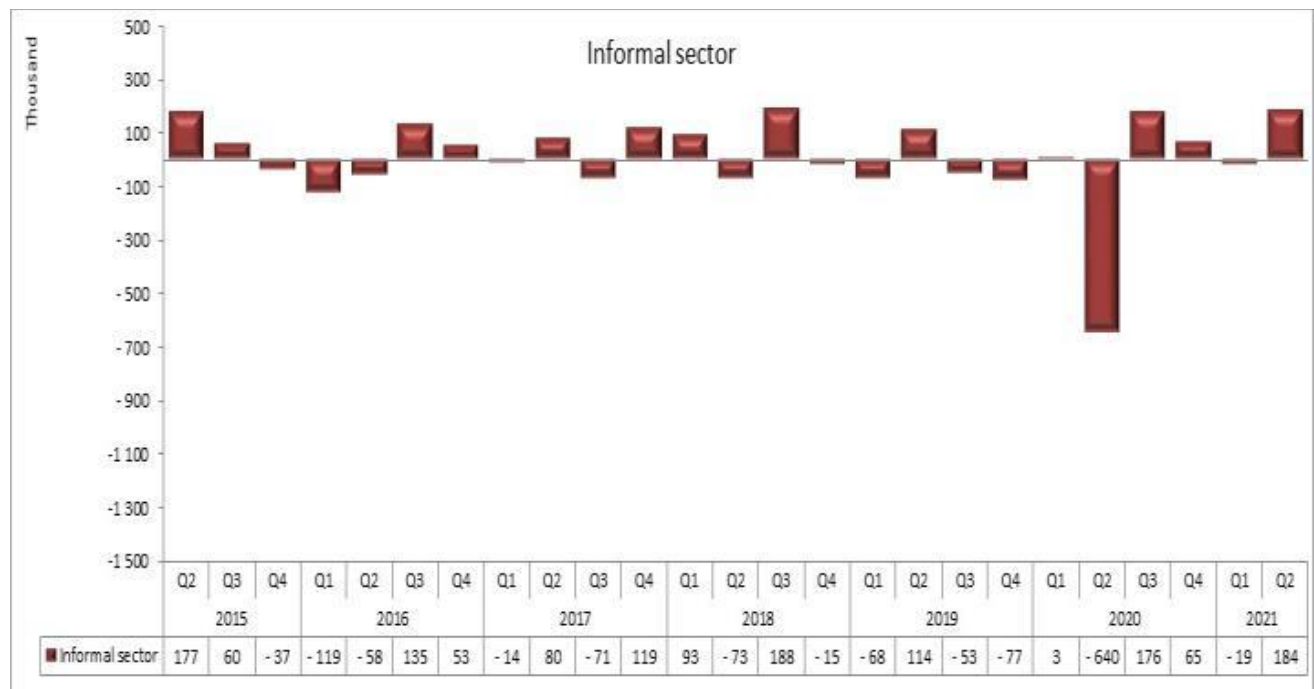
A Synopsis of Employment & Unemployment Patterns in South Africa in The Last Decade

Historically, the informal and formal employment sectors have dominated the South African labour market. Informal sector employment involves individuals that engage in largely unregulated, and sometimes hazardous employment while the formal sector is often the standardised and regulated form of employment. The informal sector has had been growing compared to the formal sector that has experienced some stagnation due to existing labour market policy within South Africa's employment environment (Altman 2002a; Edwards 2000; Meth 2001).

A summary of the South Africa informal and formal sectors is provided in the chart below. According to the report, there were job losses in five of the eight formal sector industries in South Africa. There was a *decline* in employment in some aspects of the formal sector as follows: the financial sector (229 000 jobs), community and social services (151 000 jobs), manufacturing (105 000 jobs), trade (42 000 jobs), mining (2 000 jobs), and Construction (112,000 jobs). Curiously, the Transportation sector (316,000 jobs) recorded the highest job gains, while Utilities saw no change in employment.



Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey, Quarter 2: 2021



Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey, Quarter 2: 2021

The representation of the South African formal and informal sector employment patterns in the above chart indicates that while there was an overall decrease in informal sector employment in Q1: 2021 (19 000 jobs), employment in this sector grew by 184 000 jobs in Q2: 2021. Formal sector employment declined by 375 000 jobs in Q2: 2021, compared to Q1: 2021. The formal sector employment in Q2: 2021 grew by 136 000 jobs compared to last year, driven primarily by the Construction (115 000 jobs), Community and Social Services (42 000 jobs), Transport (33 000 jobs), Mining (23 000 jobs) and Utilities (4 000 jobs) industries.

Despite political, economic, and demographic changes, the prevailing employment arrangement in South Africa can be traced to the era of apartheid and the post-apartheid period. During the apartheid regime in 1970, employments were based on racial disparity and discrimination. Then, most formal employment opportunities were reserved predominantly for the white population to the exclusion of all other population groups. This practice created a large swathe of the population that was unrepresented in the workforce. The policy also created a huge skills gap in the population (Venter & Levy 2014). Towards the end of the 1990s, the post-apartheid era saw the promulgation of far-reaching legislation, programmes and policies to redress these past imbalances.

Recent research in South Africa has shown that economic growth has demanded more skilled workers than unskilled workers. Thus, the policies of the pre-democratic period turned out to have

resulted in labour force deficits which the post-1994 democratic government has had to grapple with. These short-comings needed to be addressed alongside considerations for providing decent employments that incorporate fair labour practices that are in line with the ILO principles. In this respect, therefore, the employment situation in South Africa continues to be constrained while efforts are being made to create the right environment for the emergence of adequate workforce that would take advantage of decent employment opportunities in society.

The Intersection of Unemployment and Poverty in South Africa

The trend of poverty across African nations, particularly in South Africa is quite alarming and this can be attributed to unproductive and precarious employment. Poverty in South Africa can be viewed in a broader context as being more widespread amongst black persons, the uneducated, the, female-headed households, large families, and children. The prevalence of poverty has been determined to have a strong spatial dimension in South Africa, a demonstration of the enduring effect of apartheid (World Bank, 2014).

Following the radical constitutional change in South Africa, the government has been compelled to design a number of programmes and policies for reducing poverty, improving access to basic services, education, health care, social protection, and economic opportunities. This in turn helped to reverse some of the adverse effects of the system of segregation and deprivation under apartheid. However, this development is being weakened by the country's low economic growth prospects (World Bank, 2014).

As depicted in the report of the World Bank Document “*Overcoming Poverty and Inequality in South Africa*” (2018), South Africa also has a high concentration of low-income earners (the “poor”) and a few very high-income earners (the “rich” or “elite”), but only a small number of middle-income earners. This has resulted in a high level of income polarization (Finn, 2015). The World Bank Group Poverty and Equity Report (2020) emphasised that 55.5 per cent or roughly 30.3 million people of the population is living in abject poverty while about 13.8 million, that is 25 per cent, are currently experiencing “sustenance poverty” in South Africa. Correspondingly, poverty is measured at the international poverty line of \$1.90 and \$3.20 per person per day (Bello, 2006; PPP, 2011). As it is often said that ‘virtuous occupations’ are the panacea for poverty reduction, alleviation and eradication within any society, the South African government policy interventions, such as the Labour Relations Act (LRA) of 1995, the Employment Equity Act (EEA) of 1998, and the Basic Condition of Employment Act (BCEA) of 1997, suggests that their impact on inequality, and thus on poverty, has been very modest. Creating good jobs for the poor will have a much larger impact on inequality and poverty.

Poverty is rooted in unemployment and underemployment. The poor are often unable to improve their quality of life without the income they earn through work. In order to reduce poverty and ensure sustainable economic and social development, it is necessary to create productive ('decent') employment opportunities. Providing decent jobs for women and young people, especially, is crucial for securing income and empowering the poor (UN Report, 2007). An expansion of the economy under circumstances of rapid growth can increase the number of productive and remunerative jobs, which can decrease poverty levels. Although economic growth is important to poverty reduction, it is not the only factor. The distribution of income will be determined by the ability of the poor to respond to the increasing demand for labour in more productive job categories. The above illustration and many more have underpinned the subject matter of decent employment and poverty alleviation in the current paper.

Implications of Unemployment and Poverty for Socio-Economic Development

Unemployment and poverty are global phenomena that the government of each state must combat with the determination of eradicating the menace from the society. Not only does unemployment exist in many countries, it is very rampant in South Africa and has been a major cause of poverty in society. Creating jobs must occupy a central place in national poverty reduction strategies given the importance of employment in reducing poverty (Mafiri, 2002). A number of employment strategies are often connected to agricultural and regional development, such as promoting micro projects in rural areas and using labour-intensive agricultural technologies. In addition to promoting self-employment, non-farm employment in rural areas, targeted employment interventions, microfinance and credit as resources for skill development and training, are some additional strategies that encourage individuals to become self-employed (OECD, 2008).

The problem with such strategies, however, is that they commonly address the quantity of employment while overlooking or underestimating the qualitative aspects such as equity, security, dignity and freedom. Generally speaking, national poverty reduction strategies do not address decent employment principles such as, social protection, or worker rights. Social perspectives on development promote the view that decent work is the most effective means of achieving socio-economic development, eradicating poverty and enhancing personal wellbeing. In order to achieve international development goals, including the Millennium Development Goal of halving extreme poverty, productive employment opportunities are critical (UN Report, 2007). Better and more productive jobs should be created, especially those that can absorb the high concentrations of low-wage workers. A few elements are necessary to create such jobs. They include investing

in labour-intensive industries, such as agriculture, promoting a shift in employment structure to more productive sectors and occupations, and improving employment quality in the informal economy. The provision of skills and assets to the poor is also imperative. Consequently, the poor will be able to fully capitalize on any expansion in employment possibilities (UN Report, 2007).

Methodology

Non-experimental descriptive qualitative research was employed in the paper. In this analysis, the qualitative method was selected because it enumerates the aspects of precarious employment in relation to poverty. Published reports pertaining to the labour force, employment and unemployment rates in South Africa were analysed. Furthermore, the reports of the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) of Statistics South Africa were used in the analysis.

Table 1: South Africa's Decent Work indicators (Adapted from QLFS, 2021)

	Apr-Jun 2020	Jan-Mar 2021	Apr-Jun 2021	
	(Thousand)			
Population 15–64 yrs.	39 021	39 455	39 599	0,4%
Labour force	18 443	22 237	22 768	2,4
Employed	14 148	14 995	14 942	-0,4
• formal sector (non-agricultural)	10 064	10 574	10 200	-3,5
• Informal sector (non-agricultural)	2 280	2 502	2 686	7,4
• Agriculture	799	792	862	8,7
• Private households	1 005	1 127	1 194	6,0
Unemployed	4 295	7 242	7 826	8,1
Not economically active	20 578	17 218	16 832	-2,2
Discouraged work-seekers	2 471	3 131	3 317	5,9
Other (not economically active)	18 107	14 086	13 515	-4,1
• Unemployment rate	23,3 %	32,6 %	34,4 %	
• Employed/population ratio (absorption)	36,3 %	38,0 %	37,7 %	
• Labour force participation rate	47,3 %	56,4 %	57,5 %	

SOURCE: STATISTICS SOUTH AFRICA – Quarterly Labour Force Survey (2021)

Findings and Discussion

The above table depicts the labour force of South Africa from April 2020 to June 2021. According to this report, the labour market interaction for 2021 does not encompass the entire economy. It takes into account the population aged 15 to 64 years in the labour force, that is, employed persons in formal and informal industries, in agricultural production, and private households, as well as the unemployed and the economically inactive in South Africa. The adult population increased by 145 000 or 0.4 percent from the first quarter (Q1) of 2021. An additional 578 000 workers (or 1.5%) aged 18-24 joined the workforce. Thus, the number of employed people decreased by 54 000 in Q1 2021, and the number of unemployed had increased by 584 000, resulting in an increase of 530 000 (2,4%) among people who were in the labour force. The number of discouraged job seekers grew (4.1%) between the two quarters, but the number of those not actively searching decreased (4.1%). As a result, 386 000 fewer people were unemployed between the two quarters (QLFS, 2021).

The differences between individual labour market status categories were taken into account in order to better understand the observed large shifts between Q1: 2021 and Q2: 2021. The unemployment rate jumped from 32.6% to 34.4% between the second quarter and the third quarter. This is due to a large number of individuals moving from employable and inactive statuses to unemployed statuses during these quarters. Since the start of the Quarterly Labour Force Survey in 2008, this is the highest unemployment rate ever recorded. Due to these movements, the labour force participation rate also increased by 1.1 percentage points to 57.5% in Q2: 2021 as compared to Q1: 2021. The absorption rate fell by 0.3 percentage points to 37.7% in the second quarter of 2021 over the first quarter (QLFS, 2021).

In Q2: 2021, only 375 000 jobs were lost in the formal sector, while 184 000 were added in the informal sector, 69 000 in the agricultural sector, and 67 000 in private households. This is an indication that in 2021 the informal sector received more growth than the formal sector in South Africa. Overall, employment has grown by 793 000 jobs since the previous year. There were 3.5 million more unemployed people in the labour force, while there were 3.7 million more people who were not economically active (QLFS, 2021).

The population of South Africa has grown exponentially as depicted above, but the unemployment rate has risen by 8.1percent, and the employment rate has decreased by 0.4 percent. These numbers have been boosted by the discouragement of work-seekers which has risen 5.9 percent. This has automatically resulted in chronic poverty, one of the most intractable challenges for South Africa's workforce despite numerous government interventions. South Africa's Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative (ASGISA) is one of many policies enacted by government to promote

decent employment and also to promote economic growth. The policy framework's main objective is to create jobs. According to the plan, a million jobs would have been created by this programme in the five years to 2020. This combination of factors, coupled with the current stagnant economic growth in South Africa, makes it vitally important for funders, policy makers, and those working on projects aimed at employment creation to evaluate and invest in programmes that promote positive attitudes toward employment.

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

It can be deduced from the above analysis that there are a lot of intricacies within the South African labour market especially in the employment creation environment. The employment rate has dropped dramatically while the unemployment rate continues to rise, which was happening even before the COVID-19 pandemic. It is feared that if the experience of the pandemic is prolonged, it would continue to negatively affect the decent employment situation in South Africa and around the African continent and the world. The analysis thus far points to the trend that the informal sector has grown nominally than the formal sector in terms of employment in South Africa. This trend does not, however demonstrate that decent employment opportunities have been created in the economy.

One thing that the trend does show though is that large-scale unemployment remains a major socio-economic challenge to the country. This is more so as it has been established that unemployment or indecent employment breeds poverty in society.

Recommendations:

- Decent employment that is in sync with the ILO principles can help society to combat the challenge of poverty.
- A well-considered policy of government to empower the informal sector can help in the employment creation efforts of the country.
- There is a need to redouble efforts to ensure that the underpinning considerations that led to policy enactments to redress the historical imbalances and inequalities of the South African employment environment is concertedly pursued.
- The provision of decent employment should be vigorously pursued by government in order to eradicate poverty.

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