

Green Jobs for the Poor: Why a Public Employment Approach is Needed Now

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In the context of the economic and environmental challenges that the world is facing today, there have been calls for a Global Green New Deal (see, for example, UNEP/ILO/IOE/ITUC, 2008). Such calls have highlighted the employment-creation benefits of “green” investments, mainly those aimed at accelerating the shift to low-carbon economies. Policy innovations by developing countries, such as South Africa and India in particular, also point to the value of employment-generating environmental activities relevant for reclaiming or enhancing access to public environmental goods and services, as well as for improving the productive livelihoods of the poor. This One Pager outlines the economic rationale for promoting these types of “green jobs” and for adopting a “public employment” approach in this regard.

In many developing countries, areas critical to the continued functioning of larger ecosystems are in need of urgent attention. A number of the activities involved— e.g. planting native vegetation, removing invasive species, building structures that reduce erosion, protecting reserves and watershed management—are highly labour-intensive and have the potential to create employment for the poor. The benefits of these investments most often accrue to poor and local communities and the income yielded by such beneficial environmental activities also eases pressures to exploit the environment.

Until recently, however, these types of investments were under-recognised in mainstream poverty reduction and environmental policies. Lieuw-Kie-Song (2009) argues that, first, this is because the benefits of investing in the environment are still difficult to quantify accurately, even though they are often clear. As a result, it is difficult for such investments to compete for resources with others whose benefits can be quantified more easily. Second, the lack of “functional markets” for most ecosystem services compounds this difficulty, since there is little recognition of the value of the services that ecosystems provide, and currently there appear to be no market mechanisms to drive investments in natural resources to the degree required.

Lieuw-Kie-Song proposes a framework for analysing investments in the environment based on who receives the benefits. The study argues that in many cases governments should take the lead in making these investments, using public employment programmes, because: (i) employment creation for the poor should be an integral part of poverty reduction strategies; (ii) when the benefits of these investments accrue directly to the poor, the government should act within its mandate of poverty reduction; (iii) governments have a role to play when markets are either failing or dysfunctional;

(iv) it is increasingly clear that the risks of not investing in natural resources are enormous, both in terms of the scale of the impact and of the long-term and often irreversible damage that can be done; and (v) even if the benefits cannot be quantified accurately, they often accrue to the government either directly or indirectly.

Lieuw-Kie-Song’s study explores programmes such as South Africa’s Working for Water initiative, which began in 1995 and had cleared 856,000 hectares of invasive alien vegetation by 2009. This resulted not only in increased stream-flows and water availability, but also in improvements to land productivity, the maintenance of biodiversity in ecologically sensitive areas where invasive plants often overtake native species, greater resilience to fires, and support for the conservation of many protected areas and reserves critical to South Africa’s growing tourism industry. It spawned a number of other public employment programmes such as Working for Wetlands, Working on Fire, Working for the Coast, Working for Tourism and Working on Waste. Proposals are being prepared for other programmes such as Working for Energy. The latter focuses on activities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, such as installing solar water heaters, improving the energy efficiency of government buildings, and generating energy from biomass waste.

Additionally, the study looks at examples from India’s National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), which has a strong natural-resource management component, particularly in the areas of water harvesting and micro watershed management. In a number of instances, the employment generation projects have helped raise agricultural productivity and improve the livelihoods of poor farmers, although the sustainability of the assets may emerge as an issue.

The current global economic crisis and concerns about climate change are spurring a thorough rethinking of the state’s role in the economy. This reconsideration is being stimulated in part by emerging evidence of the importance of large-scale social assistance programmes in increasing economic and social resilience. There is also growing recognition of the need for increased investments in natural-resource management and the environment. Environment-centred public employment programmes represent a synergy of these two shifts, and they warrant our attention and consideration now—not only as crisis mitigation measures, but also as important policy interventions for inclusive and sustainable growth.

References:

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