

# THE ROADSIDE WORK-SEEKER PHENOMENON IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN INFORMAL CONSTRUCTION SECTOR

Sylvia Hammond<sup>1</sup>, Paul Bowen<sup>2</sup> and Keith Cattell<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PO Box 22475, Fish Hoek, 7974, South Africa

<sup>2&3</sup> Department of Construction Economics and Management, University of Cape Town, Private Bag, Rondebosch 7701, Cape Town, South Africa

Morning commuters on urban South African roads observe dozens of roadside work-seekers displaying signs - or tools - of their construction sector trades, despite a proclaimed national artisan skill shortage. Additionally, all the roadside work-seekers are African men, ostensibly the target group of transformation legislation promoting economic inclusion. Mixed methods were adopted to explore the roadside recruitment practices, namely: unstructured focus groups with roadside work-seekers, semi-structured telephonic interviews with junior and micro contractors (SMECs); and an online focus group with education and training practitioners. A comprehensive strategy for integrated and articulated post-school education and training exists, supported by extensive development of public TVET colleges, offering occupational qualifications. However, the extended employment periods and formal assessments required are not suited to the SMECs, who confirm practices of “on-the-job” training and observational competence assessment. Recruitment by word-of-mouth excludes inter-provincial migrants, and legislation to promote economic inclusion excludes non-citizens. The human capital of roadside work-seekers is undervalued by terminology of “labourer” and “migrant”, which have apartheid-era connotations. Discrete skill recognition and coaching skills for supervisors and artisans are advocated for the SMECs; with a revised “roadside contractor” status, and an industry job-completion bonus, such as the fishing sector “agsterskot”.

Keywords: labourer, migrant, roadside work-seeker, sub-contractor

## INTRODUCTION

As Mxolisi watched the new young bricklayer, he recalled his father teaching him how to lay bricks many years ago in the Eastern Cape. He notes the youth's attitude and willingness to learn - qualities Mxolisi believes are the key to success. After his father's death Mxolisi left the rural area and travelled to Johannesburg, where he joined the roadside work-seekers, displaying signs indicating their skills. As a result of an award-winning initiative: "Men at the Side of the Road" many of the Cape Town roadside work-seekers have tools to identify their trade - rather than signs. Mxolisi subsequently moved to Cape Town, which offered higher daily rates, the company of many fellow isiXhosa-speaking work-seekers, and proximity to his rural home. He formalised his experience and skills by attending a local training college, and started

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<sup>1</sup> shammond@iafrica.com

his own business. He is now an employer with sufficient means to build his rural retirement home part-time. Mxolisi's success story appears to indicate a means of social mobility, which raises the question why in South Africa (SA) - with a proclaimed scarcity of artisan skills - do so many men remain at the roadside? This study forms part of continuing empirical research into the implementation of skills development in the informal sub-sectors of the construction sector. The dual aims of this study are to ascertain the effectiveness of the strategic intentions of skills development and economic inclusion for the SMECs, and to gain an appreciation of the experiences of roadside work-seekers.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The construction sector is recognized internationally as an entry-level employer of unskilled and semi-skilled labour (Wells 1986, 2007; Ofori 2012; Wells 2012; Odediran and Babiola 2013). South African expectations post-apartheid have been that infrastructure development would benefit economic inclusion by developing emerging contractors and providing employment (Hill et al. 2003; Kraak 2005; CIDB 2009; Ranjit et al., 2011; CIDB 2013, 2015). However, concurrent with the drive for economic inclusion, the local construction industry has followed global trends of informalisation and casualisation of labour (Cheadle and Clarke 2000; Theron and Godfrey 2000; Thompson 2003; Garen 2006) The larger construction companies have evolved into professional project, systems integration and turnkey specialists, with physical construction either pre-produced, or constructed onsite by sub-contractors. The work is further outsourced for procurement of unskilled and semi-skilled labour via labour brokers and "labour-only" contracts (Theron 2005; CIDB 2015, 16, 19). In 2014 labour law amendments (RSA 1995, 1997, 1998) significantly curtailed labour broking, but with potential unintended consequences for skills development implementation see Hammond, Bowen, et al., (2015)).

Ofori (2012) identified the importance of research on the construction sector in developing countries and the positive potential of the sector. However, in the South African context with an apartheid history of exclusion from education and skills, human resource management of an increasingly diverse workforce and concurrent employee development are critical. English (2002) highlighted the importance of cross-cultural communication, and Greef (1990) pointed to the importance of cross-cultural people management by highlighting the attitudes of supervisors classified as "coloured" to the rising African workforce. Toor and Ogunlana (2008:192) identified skills required for multinational personnel management as: decision-making, problem-solving, listening skills, and recommended development of "...cross-cultural leadership competencies..." for inclusion in university programmes. However, the majority of SMECs do not have a tertiary level of education (CIDB 2011).

An additional relevant role of personnel management is recruitment, which for SMECs has been described as informal with recruitment based upon social networks (Lekarapa and Root 2011; Crankshaw 2014). This recruitment process does not take account of formal qualifications or follow professional human resource management recruitment methods, and appears not to have changed despite: the introduction of the skills development infrastructure post 2000 (Cattell 1994; Cattell et al., 1996; Cattell 1997; CIDB 2015), and a number of developmental interventions for emerging contractors (Martins 2005; Lazarus et al., 2006; Hauptfleisch and Verster 2007; Martin 2010).

In many countries the unskilled construction work is "...mainly occupied by migrants..." (CIDB 2015, 16), and particularly in developing countries migrants who seek a livelihood in the urbanized centres "... are increasingly forced to eke out a living on the margins of the urban economy" (Wells 2012, 167). South Africa has a history of migrant labour; following the discovery of diamonds and then gold in the 1800s. During the apartheid era the migrants who were mainly male, were excluded from skilled work and from permanent residence in the urban centres. The migrants were therefore always intended to return "home". Since 1994, legislation has been enacted to promote skills development and economic inclusion (RSA 1998a, b, 1999, 2003, 2008), which will be referred to further as the transformation legislation, and there is a constitutional right to freedom of movement and settlement and to choose a trade or occupation (RSA 1996, s21, s22).

Roadside work-seekers (referred to as "day labourers") have been shown to concentrate in areas of socio-economic development, to be mainly male and of generally low skills, and although significant effort was made to locate approximately 1000 sites nationally and about 45,000 work-seekers, the authors concluded that there was an "element of invisibility" (Harmse et al., 2009, 365). The numbers have increased and the make-up of the population has changed with increasing foreign nationals (Crush, 2011). Recently, Blaauw (2016) identifies the increase in "day labourers" and "foreign migrants", concluding that the structural unemployment will not be addressed by more skills training (Blaauw et al., 2016:6).

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

Purposive sampling identified the categories able to positively contribute to the research as: the roadside work-seekers, SMECs, and ETD practitioners. A general ethical clearance and a clearance specifically for an Online Focus Group was obtained from the University of Cape Town. The 2011 Census was used to identify a geographic area, which fairly closely reflected the national demographic profile.

Roadside work-seekers: Three main work-seeker sites were identified and visited on various week-days before 11h30. Each site consisted of small groups spread out along the roadside. All interviews were conducted and notes taken personally. The researcher was alerted to potential risks to conducting the field research by an ethnographic study by (Sterken 2010) on informal work-seeking noting high levels of suspicion and competition for work. (For a more detailed explanation see (Hammond, Cattell, et al., 2015). Given the context, the format adopted is best described as unstructured focus groups, with additional informal individual interviews. Limited notes were made on site, and more comprehensive reports written up shortly after the engagements. 55 specific individuals could be identified, some of whom may have been included in groups more than once, but were reflected as 1. When engaging with small groups, commonly curious work-seekers joined, while other members left the group discussion after ascertaining no work was on offer. Some members were not counted as they did not volunteer any information. The men were all African: 5 Mozambican, 4 Malawian, 1 Zambian, 27 Zimbabweans, and 18 South Africans (1 from the North West province and the remainder from the Eastern Cape); the ages range from 18 to 39, 2 were in the 15-24 age group, and only 4 above the 25- 34 age group; and all of the men who contributed indicated a minimum primary school education, and the Zimbabweans indicate O and A levels.

Telephonic interviews: The contractors were identified from a publicised register of the Building Industry Bargaining Council members and local service provider

directories. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted either in person or by telephone. Respondents were hesitant to reveal actual number of employees, but after confirmation that the research was confidential it was established that less than 50 covered all respondents. The questions asked related to their methods of recruitment, whether employees are qualified, and how competence is ascertained, and about awareness of available training interventions. Notes were made during and immediately after each call.

Online focus group (OFG): The OFG was conducted on a social network platform in a group visible only to the participants. An invitation was sent to all members of the social network by a broadcast message. An estimated 4,000 may have been received, dependent upon their profile settings on receipt of messages. 32 members indicated a wish to participate and agreed to the conditions, of which 27 finally completed the sign up to the group. The discussions focused on: constraints to implementation of formal qualifications in the informal sector, attitudes to qualifications, what soft skills may be advantageous to the roadside work-seekers, artisan skills and identity formation through apprenticeship, and the level of youth skills.

ETD practitioner survey: Attendees at a conference for ETD practitioners were asked for their opinions on artisan apprenticeships. Although all believed artisan training to be critical for South Africa, they expressed concern regarding the status afforded to artisan trades. All data collected was personally written up in note form and then uploaded to NVivo software for coding and analysis.

Table 1. Summary of group category and qualitative enquiry format

Category	Method Format	
Work-seekers	Unstructured focus groups and informal interviews	n=55
Contractors and industry	Individual interview, telephonic survey and email correspondence	n=29
ETD practitioners	Online Focus Group - confidential, visible only to participants	n=27
ETD practitioners	Survey of artisan conference participants	n=24

## DISCUSSION

### *Work-seeking and recruitment practices*

The roadside work-seekers comprise diverse immigrant groups from a wide range of southern and central African countries, with a predominance of Zimbabweans, and a smaller number of internal migrants in the specific sites researched - all African men. There is no indication that this is a representative demographic sample of other sites or regions. However, this research confirms previous findings that many SA citizens tend to wait at home to be called for work via neighbours and friends. When asked whether they recruit roadside work-seekers all the registered contractors indicated that when they require additional labour, they ask their employees to bring in extra workers. However, micro contractors working alone (some of whom are artisans) do utilise the roadside work-seekers. Both the migrant roadside work-seekers and the micro contractors despite being excluded by the transformation statutes, display a mutual interest in earning a living and both groups have tools, skills, and assets they deploy to jointly achieve this purpose.

The statutory exclusion arises from the legislation intended to advance groups previously discriminated against under apartheid. The non-national roadside work-seekers are not included in the definition of “black” in the Employment Equity Act (RSA 1998b). The micro contractors indicate that they prefer working for themselves, and although not articulated, they are also more likely to be excluded from formal employment by affirmative action policies under the same legislation. Additionally,

even the immigrant work-seekers who claim to have residence rights and work permits are excluded from employment in medium to larger construction companies. For the purposes of state tender acquisition, the definition of “black” is also used in the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act and “scorecard” evaluation (RSA 2003, 2015). The practical implications are that inter-provincial migrant are excluded as they lack the social capital of local employee contacts; non-national migrants are excluded by legislation; and both categories are excluded from the employment necessary for formal qualification acquisition.

Reflecting upon the difference between self-employment and formal employment, some of the work-seekers display the tools of their trade and notices of their skill and mobile phone number, which implies a self-employment contractor relationship. In Marxian terms as Pennel (2016) observes, this hints of a reclaiming of the means of production. What appears to differentiate the micro contractor from the roadside contractor with a sign and tools, is the ability to obtain finance to purchase a vehicle. During one roadside focus group one of the participants indicated that not all the people who drive up with a vehicle are artisans, indicating that some are able to get the work contract and then seek roadside work-seekers with the relevant skills. This arose from questioning seeking information on how the daily “rates” were set. There are specific daily rates per trade, which appear to be highest in Cape Town. The more skilled work-seekers indicated that they appreciate that not all the micro-contractors are able to pay the going rates.

#### *Work-seeking and qualifications*

When vehicles pull up at the roadside, workers are regarded as inter-changeable, those willing to join the vehicle are not asked what they are able or qualified to do. As they recount, they have no idea even where they are going, or what they will be required to do. There is an assumption they will be asked to mixed plaster or cement. As a counter to this demeaning behaviour some of the roadside work-seekers appear to use their tools to establish their skilled identity and status. There also appears to be a hierarchy among those displaying tools, the tiler commanding the highest rate. When pressed further the skilled workers deny that they would accept a “labouring” job. The more skilled work-seekers indicate occasional jobs for multiple weeks. The traditional skills most on display at the roadside are: brick-laying, plastering, tiling and painting, with fewer carpenters. The workers indicate that these skills have been acquired by experience and informal training, but particularly in the case of the Zimbabweans from vocational school or training centres. As indicated the Zimbabwean workers all claim to have “O” levels and some “A” levels, and are generally extremely articulate in English - as one roadside work-seeker explained: “we are British”.

In interviews where contractors are questioned about “qualified” workers, it becomes clear that the word is used to describe a worker who meets the contractor expectation - not necessarily one who is formally assessed or certificated. For the unskilled and semi-skilled positions, the contractors are more interested in the attitude to work. For example, for micro contractors the level of English language appears to be advantageous. Many of the roadside work-seekers indicate that they were trained by their father, or that their families are involved in the building industry. In the Western Cape, where there are still thatched roof cottages and Cape Dutch architecture, but no formal occupational qualification for thatching, there are a few family surnames associated with thatching - representing a traditional skill passed from father to sons.

*The skills development context*

**Financial and time constraints:** The research has identified a number of constraints to implementation of the National Skills Development Strategy (DHET 2011). For the SMECs, the local Master Builders Association has been running a supervisory training programme. The SMECs are unaware of the training, but indicate that they cannot afford to attend training either financially or in terms of lost time. The training programmes that do receive approval are those that cover new technologies and new openings for tenders, contracts, and employment. Two identified are solar panel installation, and asbestos removal. A recent programme funded by the Department of Labour Unemployment Insurance Fund with the Energy and Water Sector Education and Training Authority to train unemployed persons as solar installers experienced a 97% success rate (Ramutloa 2016). By contrast, a comparable CETA learnership programme reported lack of commitment by learners (Mummenthey and Du Preez 2010).

**Emphasis on formal qualifications:** The introduction of the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) introduced a new qualification and curriculum format. Whereas the previous “unit standard” (US) based system allowed credits against an individual US, the new format emphasises full qualifications. Although the development of occupational qualifications ostensibly adopts a consultative process involving professional bodies, academics, and subject-matter experts, the persons who are invited and are able to attend and contribute to the process are not representative of the SME contractors. One further aspect is that Recognition of Prior Learning has not been effectively implemented. There is no incentive for employers to promote formal qualification recognition as this may imply an increased wage rate. For individuals the process of drawing up a portfolio and being assessed would be unaffordable. The roadside work-seekers and sub-contractors are not aware of the RPL process, nor of the recognition of international qualifications via the South African Qualification Authority (SAQA).

*Table 2: Construction sector participation in skills development*

Number of employees	0-49	49-149	150+	Total
Paying Skills Levy (SDL)	1735	808	55	1970
Submitting WSP and ATR	294	129	53	476
Percentage	16.9	16	96.4	24.2

*(CETA, 2014)*

**Lack of participation.** Employers with an annual payroll in excess of R500 000 per annum are required to pay a skills levy of 1% of annual payroll (SDL) to the South African Revenue Service (SARS). The low participation in annual reporting (training planned = WSP and undertaken = ATR) to the Construction Education and Training Authority (CETA) precludes the SDL-paying contractors from access to the SDL refund or discretionary funding of apprenticeships and learnerships. The following table indicates that it is the largest companies of more than 150 employees that benefit most from the skills levy funding.

**Public TVET Colleges:** The OFG raised integration of trade test centres into public TVET colleges as a constraint. The previous “building training centres” were run by builders and staffed by trainers, who were time-served artisans. The older artisans trained and passed on skills and knowledge, when the physical work became taxing. The artisan skills shortage allows current artisans to command a much higher rate of pay than the TVET institutions are able to afford. The outcome described is that the current trainers are not experienced artisans and do not have the necessary level of

practical expertise. The focus is on theory and passing on of knowledge rather than practical skill. One training provider observed: "... the bricklayers don't need to understand who Pythagoras was, or his theorem to apply the 3:4:5 rule to construct 90 degree corners". Finally, in recently the value of the TVET qualification has been identified as not questioned providing any additional income vis-à-vis a school-leaving certificate (Bhorat et al., 2016).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Informalisation and organisational restructuring of the construction sector are international trends, but this study suggests the relevance of the South African historical context. Formal occupational qualifications: The national skills development strategy aims to increase economic participation and inclusion. However, this strategy occurs against a global backdrop of rapid technological advance and reduced formal employment. A recent report on the construction sector suggests that employers: "... distanced themselves from the public institutions..." (Lolwana et al., 2015, 34) - referring to the public TVET colleges. However, as the OFG participants suggest, this "distancing" may be an indication of the inappropriateness of the formal college structure and formal occupational qualifications for the industry requirements. The CETA statistics confirm the lack of participation of other than the largest companies, and sub-contractor interviews confirm lack of recognition of qualifications. The largest companies appear to be benefitting disproportionately from the skills levy system.

Formal qualifications are required for infrastructure construction, and heavy industries such as mining, with stringent health and safety legislative requirements. However, Charman and Petersen (2016) have identified a previously unrecognised growth in the informal sector, which may be anticipated to increase with the continued urbanisation. From the research data to date, where on-the-job-training persists and competence exists in the eye of the contractor, the most useful focus would appear to be coaching skills for supervisors and artisans, to pass on their knowledge and skills. Extension of the current qualification format uniformly across all sectors and levels would appear to be inappropriate. The construction sector may be differentiated vertically from other sectors, and horizontally separating the SMECs. At the lower level the "building block" credit accumulation of the previous unit standards and recognition of prior skills acquired appears to be more appropriate, rather than full occupational qualifications.

The nature of employment relationships: The SMEC sub-sector of construction remains a source of work and income, although not in the format of formal employment. Additionally, the micro-contractors and roadside work-seekers appear to have a symbiotic relationship of the mutually excluded. This suggests a relationship along a continuum somewhere between that of a formal contract of employment and an independent sub-contractor, by definition a different form of contract (Hagi 2015), such as a "roadside contractor". Provision of social security: Peripatetic work and periods of non-work exclude traditional deductions for industry sick leave, holiday, or retirement funds, tax, and social security. Securing a continuous income stream is a concern for the intermittently employed unskilled and semi-skilled workers, as well as the micro-contractors. A suggestion that may improve the economic status of labour is the adoption of an end of project or work bonus, such as payments in agriculture, or the fishing sector "agsterskot" paid after the catch has been sold. Retrenchment from formal employment attracts a severance

payment - in SA labour law calculated at one week of pay for each completed year of service. An end-of-contract bonus could be calculated at the prevailing regional rates.

Finally, as the introductory paragraph indicated, there has been some progress on social mobility. However, race remains the dominant focus rather than class, although it is the working class who still reside in segregated townships - as do the roadside work-seekers. The terminology of "day labourers" to describe the work-seekers harks back to an apartheid era where black people were excluded from skilled occupations. Many of the work-seekers have acquired skills by both training and experience. Equally, the nature of the migrants has changed: many of the work-seekers interviewed have been in SA for extended periods and are family men here with their wives and children. From a human capital perspective, the unemployment and under-employment represents a significant loss to the SA economy, although needs to be placed in context against unemployment rates nationally and in the region of the research of 26.7%, and 20.9%, respectively (StatsSA 2016). In conclusion, in the informal construction sector there appears to be minimal change in life circumstances of the participants despite the post-apartheid political and skills development dispensations.

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