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From Empty Schools to New Opportunities: A Rural Solution for South Africa

Reimagining Closed Rural Schools to Fight Unemployment, Improve Healthcare and Rebuild South Africa

Introduction

Oqubay, A. and Valodia, I., (2021) outline that, South Africa faces several interconnected challenges that continue to affect the lives of millions of people, particularly those living in rural communities. Unemployment refers to a situation where people who are willing and able to work cannot find suitable employment opportunities. Healthcare refers to the services, facilities and professionals responsible for preventing illness, treating diseases and promoting the health and well-being of communities. Naape, B., (2026) states that, Infrastructure refers to the basic physical facilities and systems that support people's daily lives and economic activities, including buildings, roads, water, electricity, sanitation and healthcare facilities. These three challenges are closely connected because communities with limited infrastructure often have fewer employment opportunities and poorer access to healthcare. My proposal is to address these challenges by giving closed rural schools a new purpose. Instead of allowing schools that have closed because of declining learner numbers to become abandoned and deteriorate, I propose transforming them into agricultural centres, healthcare facilities, skills-development centres and community businesses.

Reusing the Schools Our Communities Already Have

Jiusto, S., (2023) argues that, Across some rural communities, there are school buildings that are no longer being used because of declining numbers of learners. These buildings represent more than classrooms and concrete structures. Many were built through the sacrifices, contributions and determination of previous generations who believed that education would create better opportunities for their children. Allowing these buildings to become neglected would mean losing valuable infrastructure and part of the history of those communities. Instead, these schools should be renovated and given a second life. Their classrooms, halls, offices, kitchens and surrounding land can be transformed into facilities that respond directly to the needs of the communities around them.

My vision is to create rural community development hubs from these closed schools. Each school would first be assessed to determine what the surrounding community needs most. Some could become agricultural centres, others could become clinics, while others could become skills-development centres or small-business hubs. This approach would prevent a one-size-fits-all solution and ensure that each community benefits from the resources that are already available.

Turning Closed Schools into Agricultural Centres

One of the main parts of my proposal is to use the land surrounding suitable closed schools for agriculture. Vegetables such as spinach, cabbage, onions, tomatoes and other crops suitable for the local climate could be grown. Where appropriate, the programme could also include poultry, eggs and livestock production. Modern farming methods, irrigation systems, greenhouses and water-saving technologies could be introduced where they are practical and affordable says Honchar, M., (2024).

The agricultural centres would not only produce food for local families. They could develop into small rural businesses that supply local shops, restaurants, schools, hospitals and eventually larger supermarket supply chains. This could create employment throughout the agricultural process. People would be needed to prepare the land, plant crops, maintain farms, harvest produce, package food, transport products, manage finances and market the businesses. Young people could also receive agricultural and entrepreneurship training, allowing them to develop skills that can lead to their own businesses in the future.

Fighting Unemployment Through Rural Enterprise

Anwar, S., (2016) declares that, The agricultural programme would directly contribute to addressing unemployment. Instead of waiting for employment opportunities to come from major cities, communities could create economic opportunities where people already live. Jobs could include agricultural workers, drivers, administrators, security workers, cleaners, technicians, food processors, marketers and business managers.

The programme could also create opportunities for young people who struggle to enter the formal job market. Training centres could teach practical skills such as farming, food processing, computer literacy, entrepreneurship, construction, sewing and other skills based on local demand. The objective would be to create both employment and entrepreneurship opportunities. A person could begin by working at a community agricultural centre, gain experience, receive training and eventually establish a small business that employs other people.

Improving Healthcare in Rural Communities

Kassie, G.M., (2022) states that, Healthcare is another major part of my vision. Some rural communities have limited access to healthcare facilities, meaning residents may have to travel considerable distances to receive medical assistance. Suitable closed schools could be renovated into community clinics or healthcare centres in partnership with the relevant provincial health authorities. The existing classrooms could potentially be converted into consultation rooms, treatment rooms, waiting areas, administrative offices and other healthcare spaces. Depending on the needs of the community and the suitability of the building, facilities could support primary healthcare, maternal and child healthcare, chronic disease services, health education and referrals.

These facilities would need to meet the necessary health, safety, accessibility and professional standards. The purpose would not simply be to put medical equipment into an old school building, but to properly transform suitable infrastructure into safe and functional healthcare facilities. This would

bring healthcare services closer to rural residents and could also create employment for healthcare workers, administrative staff, cleaners, security personnel and maintenance workers.

Rebuilding Rural Infrastructure

Chou, R.J., (2024) advocates for the rebuilding the rural infrastructure by mentioning that, The proposal would also contribute to improving rural infrastructure. Instead of allowing existing buildings to deteriorate and then spending additional money constructing completely new facilities, suitable existing infrastructure could be repaired and upgraded. Renovations could include roofs, electricity, water systems, sanitation, security, accessibility and other essential services. However, the programme would not stop at the school buildings. Where possible, it could encourage improvements to roads, water access, electricity, internet connectivity and transportation systems around the development hubs. Good infrastructure is important because agricultural businesses cannot operate effectively without reliable transport, water and electricity, while healthcare facilities cannot provide effective services without proper infrastructure.

Preserving the History of Our Forefathers

There is also an important cultural and historical reason for preserving these schools. Many rural schools were established because communities understood the importance of education and worked hard to create opportunities for future generations. These buildings therefore represent the hopes and sacrifices of people who came before us. I would preserve part of the history of each participating school by documenting its story through photographs, community interviews, records and information about former teachers, learners and community leaders where such information is available. A small section of each renovated facility could display this history. The building would therefore remain connected to its original purpose while serving a new generation. We should not think of repurposing these schools as destroying their history. Instead, we should see it as continuing their legacy in a different form stated by Devincenzi, G., (2023).

What I Would Do With R1 Billion

If I were awarded R1 billion, I would use the money as an investment in rural communities rather than simply spending it on short-term projects. I would begin by identifying suitable closed schools and conducting assessments to determine their structural condition and the needs of the communities surrounding them. A portion of the funding would be used to renovate and secure the buildings. Another portion would support agricultural projects, including irrigation, farming equipment, seeds, storage and processing facilities. Funding would also be directed towards the development of healthcare facilities in communities where there is a genuine need and where buildings can safely be converted for that purpose.

I would also invest in skills-development programmes for young people and unemployed community members. Training would focus on agriculture, entrepreneurship, business management, technology and other practical skills. Part of the funding would support market access by helping community enterprises with packaging, transportation, branding and quality-control systems so that they can eventually supply

larger markets. Importantly, the programme would need strong financial management and monitoring. The success of the investment should be measured by the number of jobs created, businesses established, agricultural production generated, healthcare services delivered and buildings successfully brought back into productive use.

Creating Sustainable Communities

The long-term goal of my proposal is not to create projects that depend forever on government or donations. The goal is to create self-sustaining community enterprises. An agricultural centre should eventually generate income from the food it produces. A training centre should create skilled people who can establish businesses. A community enterprise should develop relationships with markets and customers.

This would create a cycle of development. A renovated school creates a working space. The working space creates employment. Employment provides income for families. Agricultural production provides food and business opportunities. Healthcare facilities improve access to essential services. Skills-development programmes create new entrepreneurs. Together, these activities strengthen the local economy.

Conclusion

South Africa's challenges of unemployment, healthcare and infrastructure cannot be solved by looking at each problem separately. They are connected, and our solutions should therefore be connected as well. My proposal is to transform suitable closed rural schools into agricultural centres, healthcare facilities, skills-development centres and community businesses. This would allow us to reuse infrastructure that already exists while creating new opportunities for people who need them.

If I received R1 billion, I would invest it in people, buildings, agriculture, healthcare, skills and sustainable businesses. I would turn unused classrooms into places where people can work and learn. I would turn unused school grounds into productive agricultural land. I would transform suitable buildings into healthcare facilities where communities need them. Most importantly, I would give rural communities the opportunity to participate directly in creating their own economic future.

The school gates may have closed, but the future of the community does not have to close with them. We can take the buildings our forefathers created for the education of their children and transform them into places that create employment, provide healthcare, produce food and build new opportunities for generations to come. We should not allow empty schools to become symbols of decline. We should turn them into symbols of possibility.

Recommendations

I recommend that the South African government, municipalities, traditional leaders and local communities work together to identify suitable closed rural schools and transform them into productive community development centres. I recommend that these buildings be renovated and used according to the needs of each community, such as agricultural centres, healthcare facilities, skills-development

centres and small-business hubs. I also recommend that young people and unemployed community members be prioritised for training and employment opportunities in areas such as agriculture, entrepreneurship, technology and construction. Partnerships with private businesses, healthcare institutions, agricultural organisations and training institutions should be encouraged to provide funding, equipment, knowledge and market opportunities. Finally, I recommend that strong financial management, community participation and regular monitoring be put in place to ensure that the investment creates sustainable jobs, improves healthcare access, strengthens rural infrastructure and continues benefiting communities for many years.

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