

“LETSEMA / ILIMA” CAMPAIGN: A SMOKE SCREEN OR ESSENTIAL STRATEGY TO DEAL WITH UNEMPLOYMENT CRISIS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Introduction

From the podium, on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the founding of the African National Congress (ANC) in Durban, President Thabo Mbeki made the following call: ‘During this year, we must focus on the mobilization of our people actually to engage in the process of continuing to be their own liberators, of occupying the frontline in the popular struggle for the reconstruction and development of our country.’¹ In this speech Mbeki declared 2002 the year of the volunteer. This according to Thabo Mbeki was a call for South Africans to engage in voluntary work in the spirit of ‘letsema’ or ‘ilima.’ For the purpose of this article, both concepts will be used interchangeably..

Echoing slain US President John F. Kennedy’s famous plea to ‘ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country’, Mbeki was determined to introduce the South African citizens to the volunteering campaign which to a certain extent would inculcate within the citizens a sense of working together. With his pronouncement of this ‘letsema’ voluntary campaign, Mbeki urged South Africans to lend a hand in the national effort to build a better life for all. The pronouncement of this campaign was accompanied by the launch of the programme ‘vukuzenzele’ which could be translated into ‘Arise and Act’.² This programme too, was a vehicle for the success of the ‘letsema’ campaign. To Mbeki, this volunteering campaign is the African Renaissance in practice. To other people, there is really nothing new about this idea, except that it gives the sense of a big idea from South Africa.

‘Letsema’ volunteering campaign has been personally identified with Thabo Mbeki who is renowned for reviving old and forgotten concepts. Firstly it was the concept of the ‘African Renaissance’ which according to some people was not his coinage as some may have thought. Then there was the concept of a ‘new cadre’³ which he clearly articulated during the national general conference of the ANC in 2000. In 2002 it was the concept of ‘letsema’ which seemed to be a vibrant concept to promote reconstruction and development in South Africa. Through this campaign, South Africans have to fight and

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¹ Speech by President Thabo Mbeki, 6 January 2002, <<http://www.suntimes.co.za/2002/01/06/anc/anc14.asp>, consulted December 2003.

² **Pretoria News**, 9 February 2002.

³ The concept of the ‘new cadre’ was articulated by President Thabo Mbeki during the national general conference of the ANC in 2000. In 2000 due to the infightings which existed in the ANC provincial structures necessitated Mbeki to pronounce the idea of ‘new cadre’ after realizing that many people promoted these fighting in the ANC to advance their long time hopes of being in positions of power and influence. To deal with this matter, the ANC through the pronouncement by Mbeki sought to cultivate a ‘new cadre.’ The plan was that this cadre would be driven by the selfless desire to serve the masses and not by selfish motives grounded in the desperate quest to be rich.

overcome the attitude some people have, namely that they are entitled to receive free goods and services without any effort on their part.⁴ Whilst many people applauded Mbeki for that call, to others there was little to cheer about. For the better understanding of this concept and call by Mbeki, it is important that it is understood in its South African context.

The article intends to unravel misunderstandings and misconceptions about the meaning of volunteerism as pronounced by Mbeki. To many South Africans, volunteerism means a way to secure a job in the future if such job opportunities avail themselves. Some people have used this campaign as a job hunting springboard. The article will also examine the tensions that existed between permanent workers and volunteers. Tension between the Workers' Unions and the volunteers is also looked at. How the government officials responded in the promotion of this volunteerism campaign is also scrutinized in this article. Whatever the tensions between the ethical basis of volunteerism and the social foundation of the present age, volunteerism remains a viable process in promoting the governments' call for reconstruction and development. Despite the obvious benefits of the volunteerism campaign, this call was most likely to meet with public indifference because many communities have lost their civic spirit.

Meaning and historical background of 'letsema'/'ilima' volunteer campaign

UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, described volunteerism as follows: 'Volunteerism is not a matter of wealthy and generous people dispensing largesse to the poor. It is people from all walks of life and strata of society, who have made the choice to serve their fellow men and women whether at home or abroad.'⁵ The above words were uttered by Annan when the year 2001 was declared the 'International Year of Volunteers' by the United Nations. It is clear from this statement that Mbeki wanted the continuance of this by declaring 2002 as the 'Year of the Volunteers' in South Africa. Both leaders had the same understanding of what volunteerism is all about. They both believed that governments must take the lead in facilitating the work of the volunteers in order to increase the effectiveness of the public services. It was therefore imperative for volunteerism campaign in South Africa to be premised on international standards.

Volunteering means different things to different people. For some people the defining characteristic of volunteering is the absence of financial reward while for others lack of coercion is the main identifier. World wide, volunteering takes different forms and meanings in different settings. In most cases it is strongly influenced by the history, politics, religion and culture of the region. Although it is clearly not possible to come up with a hard and fast definition of volunteering that will take into account the variety of contexts in which it operates, it must be noted that volunteerism in South Africa is different from the way other countries understand it. The following is the South African meaning and interpretation of the volunteerism campaign.

⁴ **Sowetan**, 28 October 2002.

⁵ http://www.iyv2001.org/infobase/press/01_02_27ENG.htm>consulted October 2002.

The concepts 'letsema' and 'ilima' are synonymous. 'Ilima' has its etymological root in 'ukulima' from the Zulu language, which means 'to cultivate the land.' This could be traced to the period when the black African people lived in agrarian societies, where the land was the main factor of production, the growing of food crops for subsistence was a major social and economic activity. Each family had a piece of land on which they lived and could cultivate. During *ilima*, members of different families would move from one family's land to the next, collectively cultivating it. *Ilima* in this context was a community effort to cultivate its collective land. Participants in *ilima* were, therefore, were community volunteers⁶.

'Letsema' is a Setswana, Sesotho or Sepedi word for a group of people who would come together with the sole purpose of performing a particular task.⁷ Its roots can be traced to the early 1900s in the rural African communities. In those days, a household that needed a task performed would issue a call for a contingent to gather for work. There would be no pay, but food and African beer would be provided.⁸ What was important about the concept was the spirit in which it was done. There is much dissimilarity between 'letsema' as pronounced by Mbeki and what volunteerism means today. Mbeki launched with this campaign to revive pride among the Africans, in keeping with the theme of looking for African solutions to African problems. In justifying the importance of this campaign, Mbeki indicated that the ANC had always depended on this campaign to show that people are their own liberators. The ANC has always upheld the view that change can only be achieved with the mass involvement of the people, hence the aim of 'letsema' volunteer campaign was to mobilize people to become their own liberators from poverty and underdevelopment.⁹

R.C. Lubisi is of the opinion that 'letsema' goes beyond the confines of peasant societies. Voluntarism, as a concept, has been used in numerous instances and contexts. In South Africa, for example, it was used in 1952, during the Defiance Campaign. In that campaign, Nelson Mandela, who was a Volunteer-in-Chief, led black and white people in defying apartheid laws and volunteering themselves to be arrested for acts of civil disobedience.¹⁰ Voluntarism was also a major concept used in the recruitment of members of Umkhonto Wesizwe (MK). In the past, young men and women volunteered to engage apartheid militarily. Various charity organizations have also deployed volunteers to do work for less advantaged communities, be it the poor or the disabled.¹¹ A major criticism levelled against this campaign is accountability. For example, if one volunteers as a police officer, to who does one account to if there are problems and disciplinary measures are expected to be. Does a volunteer become subjected to a formal inquiry like full time employees if there is an act of misconduct involving a volunteer? One is convinced that when Mbeki pronounced this campaign, some of the practicalities for its implementation were not scrutinized.

⁶ **Natal Witness**, 5 February 2002.

⁷ **The Star**, 18 January 2002.

⁸ **The Star**, 18 January 2002, **Sowetan Sunday World**, 20 January 2002.

⁹ <<http://lists.anc.org.za/pipemail/ancoday/2002/000032.html>, consulted December 2003.

¹⁰ <<http://www.liberation.org.za/themes/campaigns/defiance/defiance50.php>, consulted November 2002.

¹¹ **Natal Witness**, 5 February 2002. See also **Sowetan**, 21 January 2002.

It is clear from the above mentioned examples that volunteerism entails giving oneself for the greater good. Some critics have also indicated that in most cases, volunteerism involves risks of varying degrees. It is in the preparedness to face such risks for the benefit of people other than oneself that volunteerism becomes an invaluable tool in humanity's quest for social progress. While volunteerism is based on the idealist foundations, materialism is arguably the most dominant force in present-day society. Idealistic volunteers show their willingness to enhance social progress. Materialists concern themselves with self-righteous service, whatever the offer, they expect something in return. Many such people cannot imagine working without material gain. In some instances the domains of volunteering are contested between potential volunteers and those who happen to eke out a living of those domains. The above scenario prevails in South Africa.

For this campaign to succeed in South Africa, it has to have dedicated proponents who lead by example and lead from the front. During the anti-apartheid struggle, for example, leaders displayed real commitment to serving the people. Many leaders gave up their youth, their chance of employment and joined the struggle. Some were imprisoned and others went into exile. It is not a hidden fact that in the new era, leaders are struggling to lead from the front as it happened in the pre-apartheid era. The reality in South Africa is, while the poor and unemployed are encouraged volunteering their services for free, the leaders seem not to take the campaign seriously. Some may argue that this is the nature of capitalism. This group declares that the system does not allow everybody to be rich and that only a few will be rich.¹²

Does volunteerism fit in South Africa's current society?

Many people characterizes the current age as late capitalism, while others call it the post-modern period where social progress plays a significant role. Some argue that social progress is not and should not be the concern of the so-called post-modernity. Mbeki's call meant that good old social solidarity should be promoted and celebrated. Of course, different types of social solidarity are achieved in different periods and contexts. According to Mbeki, volunteerism is an inexpensive solution to a range of socio-economic problems including unemployment.¹³ A repeatedly asked question is what triggered Mbeki to announce this volunteering campaign in 2002 when the decision to mobilize ANC members to revisit the culture of voluntary service was taken at the party's national general council in 2000.¹⁴ If this campaign would be beneficial to the South African citizens, why did it take almost two years for it to be implemented?

Despite the abovementioned benefits of volunteerism, without doubt, the call for this campaign was likely to meet public indifference as communities have lost their civic spirit. In the past, from the African communities, a civic-spirited community was marked by altruistic individuals who formed community organizations through which they

¹² **The Star**, 21 October 2002.

¹³ **Sowetan**, 21 January 2002.

¹⁴ **City Press**, 6 January 2002.

dedicated themselves to public causes. In the current South African society, the public spirit has been drained, perhaps due to unemployment crisis. This is manifested by the absence of civic structures and activism. This absence is a betrayal of a long tradition within African communities. In the past individuals volunteered to serve on community committees to tackle social issues like poverty and unemployment problems. Individuals also responded enthusiastically to calls for community meetings, as they felt a strong sense of belonging and ownership of their communities. This attitude in itself was a sense of promoting 'letsema'. A threat to the community was dealt with collectively and public engagement was a shared norm. Nowadays, people spend most of their time either waiting for the state to provide material services or complaining of its failure to meet these expectations, hence the pronouncement of volunteering campaign by Mbeki.

Steven Friedman, Director for the Centre for Policy Studies is of the opinion that if the ANC's government wants the people to work with it, it needs to show in turn it would work with the people. He viewed the call of 'letsema' by Mbeki as an act of persuading the South African citizens to join government in partnership to achieve common goals. According to him, Mbeki's motive is good venture, but doubted whether Mbeki understood the challenges facing the ANC government. He contends that this call by Mbeki was an attempt to divert people's focus from the government's failure to create jobs. Following the ANC's election manifestos for both 1994 and 1999 general elections, the issue of job creation was a priority. Mbeki's pronouncement of 'letsema' volunteerism campaign was viewed as the government's attempt to shy away from its promises and responsibilities.¹⁵

Mbeki clearly understands that a partnership between government and its citizens is needed if South Africa is to progress and advance the promotion of the reconstruction and development programme. Therefore, Mbeki's choice of 'letsema' as a volunteerism campaign and slogan was politically inspired. For inculcating the spirit of working together amongst South African citizens, this volunteerism campaign by Mbeki was commendable. Mbeki's speech may have diagnosed the unemployment problem accurately. Some people believe that Mbeki's political cure for this problem by introducing a volunteerism campaign is politically misleading. An argument is advanced that if people are to successfully work with the government, they must feel included and recognized by the government, not only in times of volunteering. If the government does not seem to value people enough to listen to them, why should they feel inclined to contribute?¹⁶ One may argue that for this campaign to yield positive results, the government should value its citizens.

One other factor that makes the call by Mbeki incomprehensible by certain sections of society is the fact that there are no signs that Mbeki's administration will ever abandon its enthusiasm for centralization. This attitude places government well beyond the reach of the grassroots citizens. The repeatedly asked question in this regard is why people should want partnership with leaders they had no direct hand in choosing. For the current South African citizens, the idea of volunteerism is a vibrant move, but Mbeki's call for this

¹⁵ **Business Day**, 22 February 2002.

¹⁶ **Afrikaner**, 31 October 2002.

campaign does not seem to be addressing the problem of unemployment. While the citizens are convinced by the government's service delivery programmes, criticisms are leveled against the government for moving at a snails' pace in creating jobs, yet people are being urged to volunteer. The choice of 'letsema' and 'vukuzenzele' campaigns should have been triggered by the feeling that South Africans showed willingness to contribute to the volunteering campaign. A logical question is how one offers himself for the volunteering campaign while suffering the realities of poverty.

For the current South African citizens, in political circles, how a person cushions the language of his presentation counts more than the content of what is presented. In an article published by the **City Press** newspaper in February 2002, Dumisani Hlophe indicated that: 'Messages such as declaring this year the year of the volunteer was indeed very important but the mode of language of presentation was not very inspiring. This is a powerful message but how much of it is in people's minds. Moreover, how much of society follows such important calls.'¹⁷ Hlophe admitted that the speech must be able to articulate the agenda of government on the one hand and inspire the citizenry and all the major role players in society to embrace the spirit of national patriotism which is necessary for the country's development on the other hand. In case of the latter, Mbeki must stand out as a statesman so that national patriotism is not confused with ANC patriotism.¹⁸

The critics of Mbeki's call contend that volunteering campaigns had beneficial results in the olden days when the spirit of working together prevailed. In South Africa today, people are more independent than in the past. This campaign has the potential to exploit those people who are desperate for employment while the wealthy ones would not bother to offer themselves as volunteers. Other political parties welcome the call by Mbeki for people to volunteer but with some reservations and accusations that the ANC led government of operating against its promises. The test for the campaign to succeed would be whether Mbeki, ministers and politicians would continue to assist their communities as volunteers or would it be a one day show and be left to the unemployed people to continue.

One other criticism against this campaign is the fact that it is the ANC's brainchild. After the ANC Gauteng Special Provincial General Council held on 4th August 2002, a declaration was made that the ANC in Gauteng has noted that the campaign was led by the ANC in the midst of community efforts and struggles for local development, thus bringing people closer to the ideals of the ANC as an organization.¹⁹ This provoked other political parties to be anti-volunteerism campaign. Political parties like the United Democratic Party (UDM) of Bantu Holomisa openly criticized Mbeki's call. In an open memorandum to Mbeki, Holomisa said that the volunteerism campaign would create false hope among the unemployed people who are desperately seeking a way to be recognized by potential employers. He further alluded to the fact that many people were

¹⁷ **City Press**, 3 February 2002.

¹⁸ **City Press**, 3 February 2002.

¹⁹ <<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/pr/2002/pr0806b.html>, consulted November 2003.

disappointed after joining this campaign and being given explicit promises regarding consideration for future employment and transfer of skills.²⁰

The fact that this campaign was politically owned by the ANC created participation problems for other stakeholders, be they political parties or non-politically aligned organizations. KwaZulu-Natal ANC leader and Transport MEC S'bu Ndebele indicated the following: 'If ANC members cannot volunteer to report crime, clean hospitals and clinics, and build schools, then who should do it?'²¹ This statement by Ndebele was an indication that the ANC controlled the campaign. In some cases, the youth responded positively to the volunteering campaign with future prospect for employment in mind and not because they were ANC members. Pieter Mulder, leader of the Freedom Front (FF) opposed this campaign as an attempt to advance the ANC's activities under the pretext of helping the community. He cited the example that for many years, schools for black children were sustained by such fund raising campaigns; therefore the ANC should not run the show as if this campaign was their initiative.²² These sentiments were echoed by Cassie Aucamp, leader of the Afrikaner-Eenheidsbeweging. Aucamp stated that under the pretext of building the nation, Mbeki was in fact building a strong ANC through campaign like 'letsema'.²³

Seemingly this campaign made more sense to elderly people rather than the youth. The voices of the aging and the aged expressed a more intellectual understanding of what 'letsema' was all about. The understanding of this campaign by the aged differed from the youth's understanding. The 'letsema' campaign in most of the African schools is promoted by elderly people rather than by the youth. The youth would make this campaign a once off event. Successful school feeding schemes are run by older women, who nurture the next generation, despite their own hardships.²⁴

Problems and successes related to the 'letsema' voluntary campaign

Mbeki's call for volunteers to help build a winning nation struck a chord among disadvantaged communities where many people signed up as police reservists, offered to clean up schools and clinics and generally give of their time, skills and labour to improve the quality of life of those around them. By comparison, wealthier, formerly white areas showed predictable apathy and disdain for volunteering their services for the reconstruction and development of South Africa.

Johan Potgieter, chairperson of the community police area board in Pretoria, indicated that only a 'negligible' number of volunteers from the middle and upper class neighbourhoods of the city had come forward to offer their services to their local police stations.²⁵ This non-commitment of this group to volunteer sent a message that

²⁰ **The Herald**, 27 November 2003.

²¹ **City Press**, 6 January 2002.

²² **Volksblad**, 31 January 2002.

²³ **Beeld**, 31 January 2002.

²⁴ Speech by the Minister of Education, Professor K. Asmal, 11 July 2003, <<http://education.pwv.gov.za>, consulted December 2003.

²⁵ **Pretoria News**, 25 February 2002.

volunteerism is for a chosen group of people and not for others. According to Potgieter, these were the people most vocal about rising crime levels and government's failure to protect them.²⁶ One may also argue that by offering to help with administration, counseling or even cleaning the place up, trained police officers would be free to fight crime.

Mbeki's call is not new in that such clarion calls are frequent in times of war. One might admit that what differs with this call by Mbeki is the fact that it holds within it the admission that the government simply cannot achieve the task of pushing back the frontiers of poverty on its own. With this campaign pronounced by Mbeki, the real test that faced his government was its ability to engage its social partners, business and labour to agree to this accord. It also remained a million dollar question, as to how the Congress of the South African Trade Union (COSATU) subscribed to this campaign as this was viewed as a threat to the workers themselves.²⁷

Some people were skeptical and felt that this campaign by Mbeki would be a failure because there was a lack of implementation plan in place for it to succeed. The notion of free-will by the volunteers was difficult to uphold. In any volunteering interaction, people's motivation to volunteer usually include a mix of reasons including peer pressure and social obligation, but it would draw the line at any overt attempt by government to force people to participate. This was evident in some parts of the country when this campaign was first put into action.

One other aspect that was left out of Mbeki's implementation plan was the element relating to the nature of benefit. To differentiate volunteering from purely voluntary leisure activity there has to be a beneficiary other than (or in addition to) the volunteer. Whilst allowing for a variety of interpretations, the broad conceptual framework demands that there be an identifiable beneficiary or group of beneficiaries (which might include such abstract notions as the environment or society itself) other than the volunteer's immediate family or friends. This campaign as postulated by Mbeki showed that society is the main beneficiary.

The notion of reward is not clear in Mbeki's volunteering campaign. This element allows for volunteers to be rewarded in some way, either non-materially through the provision of training or accreditation, or materially through the reimbursement of expenses or the payment of an honorarium. The cut-off point in drawing the distinction between volunteering and paid employment is that the volunteer should not be undertaking the activity primarily for financial gain and that any financial reimbursement should be less than the value of the work provided.

What is also lacking in this volunteerism campaign is the issue of organisational setting. In most cases volunteerism activities happen in isolation as there is a lack of volunteer organizations. Some critics believe that volunteering should be carried out through a formal, non-profit or voluntary organization of some sort. It seems as if Mbeki opted for

²⁶ Pretoria News, 25 February 2002.

²⁷ The Herald, 11 February 2002.

a more relaxed and an informal way of volunteering, but not on a one-to-one basis. Many of these campaigns happen in group activities which were not an organization or aligned to any organization.

One other problematic area in this campaign of volunteering is the expected level of commitment from the volunteers. Some institutions prefer a one-off voluntary activity, for example, painting classrooms. Others demand a certain level of commitment and exclude occasional acts. It seems that Mbeki's pronounced 'letsema' campaign encompasses a range of different levels of activity from high commitment to sporadic involvement, although it seems fair to assume that most volunteering would carry with it some degree of sustained commitment.

The pronouncement by Mbeki highlighted the fact that voluntary services were to be offered in safety and security; human rights; health; rural, urban and community development; youth development; culture and heritage; children's rights; and the environment were all allocated a month in 2002.²⁸ The lack of detail on plan on how to promote this voluntary campaign created problems for those who wanted to support it. Following the lack of a detailed plan in the implementation process of this campaign, some unions were hesitant to support this venture by Mbeki. Many reasons were advanced by the unionists as to why this campaign would not succeed. One unionist indicated that: 'The purpose of such an initiative should be to empower the community. You just can't get party branch members to clear bush around schools for a month and move on to something else next month. We need to train volunteers in communities to bring in long-term benefits.'²⁹

Conflict with unions and expectations of jobs and pay derailed the 'letsema' project. The conflict which centres mainly on the false expectation of employment that it has created, led to the fact that some programmes in this campaign were suspended in some provinces. In most institutions, union members viewed this as exploitation of the unemployed. In some cases these members felt threatened by these volunteers who usually outsmart them in doing the job. At some institutions like hospitals, volunteers were given new uniforms and cleaning equipment while permanent staff still used older equipment. This left union members feeling devalued and de-motivated. In some cases, permanent staff members ill-treated the volunteers by making them work long and abnormal shifts and made the volunteers accountable to them. In defense of the campaign, the government indicated that no one was forced to volunteer and that the campaign was about people working together and giving of themselves, not about fairness and pay.³⁰

²⁸ Months for the year 2002 were divided as follows in as far as voluntarism campaign was concerned: January - Education; February - Safety and Security; March - Human Rights; April - Health; May - Rural, urban and community development; June - Youth development; July - African and international solidarity; August - Women's emancipation; September - Culture and heritage; October - Children's Rights; and November - Environment.

²⁹ **Mail and Guardian**, 17-24 January 2002.

³⁰ **Sunday Times**, 20 October 2002.

Vusi Nhlapo, national president of the National Health and Allied Worker's Union (NEHAWU), slammed the government for not consulting them before Mbeki could launch this campaign.³¹ The same sentiments were echoed by the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union (POPCRU) and it indicated that this campaign had not been managed correctly and people had been misinformed about the possibility of getting employment.³² In total disagreement with the campaign, POPCRU's spokesperson Alfred Tshabalala stated that: 'They (volunteers) were definitely motivated by the idea of getting a job or some kind of daily allowance... You cannot play with people's lives. It is not fair to make people take such risks, or even work for nothing, knowing that they cannot even get a meal.'³³

Contrary to the abovementioned stance by POPCRU, members of the other police union, namely, the South African Police Union (SAPU) which has predominantly white members heeded Mbeki's call of volunteerism. In East London for example, SAPU members offered to work overtime without pay. These police officers would crack down on criminals in the neighbourhood during the night.³⁴

Many volunteers believed that they would be the preferred candidates for jobs when vacancies were advertised. Some volunteers were not aware that there were no vacancies as they volunteered. In September 2002, two hospitals in KwaZulu-Natal had to deal with volunteers demanding meals, uniforms and even stipend for working and traveling. Some volunteers insisted on working in the kitchens with the hope of getting meals during the day. Those who were fortunate to work in the kitchens continued volunteering unlike other groups.³⁵ It was surprising that these unions questioned the implementation of this campaign because both unions are COSATU affiliates.

Unlike in other countries, volunteerism in South Africa targets mainly the unemployed. In other countries it is understood that people who volunteer are doing so because they already have an income or support structure and in their own time wish to contribute to society's development. In addition, it is downright dangerous to expect people to contribute to service delivery in a hospital or police station without equipping them with the relevant skills. The promotion of volunteering should include the desire to bridge the aspirational-entrepreneur divide. To achieve this, it should show signs of skill development. For example, it is envisaged that when a volunteer works with AIDS orphans he/she develops basic nursing skills; while volunteering at a community radio station provides basic media skills.³⁶

To volunteer may be an act performed for free, but in a developing country like South Africa, one cannot ignore the harsh reality that the majority of the South Africans are barely able to make ends meet and daily routines are prioritized by a constant battle to

³¹ **Sunday Times**, 20 October 2002.

³² **Sunday Times**, 20 October 2002.

³³ <<http://www.suntimes.co.za/2002/10/20/news/news33.asp>, consulted November 2002.

³⁴ **Daily Dispatch**, 16 March 2002.

³⁵ **Sunday Times**, 20 October 2002.

³⁶ **City Press**, 12 January 2003; **The Citizen**, 28 August 2001.

survive. Although the spirit of 'letsema' does guide the culture of 'giving', it is not possible to give when people are unable to sustain themselves. In reality, volunteerism is not free. Mobilizing volunteers is hard work and costs money. Therefore, volunteer programs need paid coordinators. N. Naidoo, Secretary General and CEO of Vision International Africa, stated that for voluntarism to succeed in developing countries like South Africa, major factors that impede voluntarism should be identified. Naidoo states the aspects as follows:

- Need for the creation of policy and procedures for volunteers, for example, a Volunteer Act to protect the rights of volunteers and their benefits;
- Need for a volunteer mobilization fund;
- Ensure volunteer back-ups to cover natural interruptions in volunteering which are characteristic of seniors' lives;
- Establish credibility within the community;
- Pay attention to paid permanent members of staff who need assurance that volunteers are not going to take away their jobs;
- Need for infrastructure to support the human networks.³⁷

Although volunteerism has come under criticism from some quarters, the ANC and Mbeki believed the practice was the only way to ensure that communities participate in their own development and are not overly reliant on government initiatives. To some people, this campaign was a good idea by Mbeki. In trying to promote this campaign further, Mbeki on the 20th June 2003, urged financial institutions to help emerging black farmers by giving them access to finance. Mbeki was of the opinion that land acquisition and its productive use were critical to successfully pushing back the frontiers of poverty.³⁸

Xolela Mangcu, Director of the Steve Biko Foundation, in his article titled 'Mbeki talked the talk-now he must walk the walk', that was published by the **Sunday Independent** newspaper, commended Mbeki for reviving the spirit of 'letsema.' Mangcu differs from Mbeki on several issues, but he is fully behind the President for the purposes of this volunteerism campaign,. Showing his joy and acceptance of the campaign he indicated that South African citizens should lend a hand in helping children register for social grants, contribute to schools and participate in a process of moral regeneration. Mangcu believes that the above mentioned contributions are the spiritual foundations upon which all national identities are built. To him, the quality of political and economic development of nations depends on their civic values.³⁹

Although there are numerous criticisms leveled against the volunteerism campaign in general and the 'letsema' campaign by Mbeki in particular, there are some benefits in volunteering. Volunteerism basically constitutes opportunities for sensitizing the government and the community on matters related to it. Volunteers provide more than service – they bring hope to those they meet and assist them in finding the strength to overcome their weaknesses. Volunteers could play a central role in uniting people for a

³⁷ <<http://www.worldwidevolunteer.org/en/library/documents>, consulted December 2003.

³⁸ <<http://www.news24.com/News24/Finance/Economy>, consulted December 2003.

³⁹ **Sunday Independent**, 10 February 2002.

common cause. When and how volunteers are recruited contributes to how effective they are on issues and how long they will continue volunteering.

For volunteerism to succeed and to ensure the maintenance of volunteers in South Africa, training and orientation are important tools for retaining volunteers. For example, provide specialized training for volunteers working with clients with special needs and old people; pair up new volunteers with experienced ones to provide orientation and build confidence; support each volunteer on an ongoing basis; clearly describe the role of the volunteer to avoid unrealistic expectations and possible misuse of the volunteer's role. Awareness is created within the community which does not place enough value on volunteers.

Conclusion

It is clear from the above arguments that Mbeki's call on volunteerism was not aimed at solving the unemployment problem in South Africa. Although this campaign was heeded by many people, it was evident that these people volunteer on the basis of being considered when job opportunities became available. Without doubt this call by Mbeki was welcomed by institutions like hospitals, clinics and police stations, but the relationship that existed between the volunteers and the permanent staff members of those institutions were in most cases not friendly. These unfriendly relationships compromised the motives for the implementation of this campaign.