

## **THE 'LETSEMA / ILIMA' CAMPAIGN: A SMOKESCREEN OR AN ESSENTIAL STRATEGY TO DEAL WITH THE UNEMPLOYMENT CRISIS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Speaking from the podium, on the occasion of the 90<sup>th</sup> 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."<sup>1</sup> In his speech Mbeki declared 2002 the year of the volunteer. This, according to Mbeki, was a call for South Africans to engage in voluntary work in the spirit of 'letsema' or 'ilima.' It must also be noted that voluntarism in South Africa did not start only after the pronouncement by Mbeki. Individuals and voluntary organizations continued to operate long before the pronouncement.

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 voluntarism 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".<sup>2</sup> G Manser and RH Cass see voluntarism as having a unique role to play in the democratic process by fostering the widest possible degree of freedom for the individual, through voluntary organizations of his choice, to act, to create, to experiment and to reach out for new goals.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore with this understanding

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

<sup>2</sup> 'A better life for all' was the leading election slogan of the African National Congress (ANC) during the June 1999 general election.

<sup>3</sup> G Manser and RH Cass, **Voluntarism at the crossroads** (New York, 1976), p. 11.

that Mbeki pronounced the importance of voluntarism in South Africa. The pronouncement of this campaign was accompanied by the launch of the programme 'vukuzenzele' which could be translated into 'arise and act'.<sup>4</sup> This programme, too, was a vehicle for the success of the 'letsema' campaign because people are urged to lend a helping hand by volunteering. With this campaign, Mbeki aimed at encouraging the strengthening and extension of collective action to meet social needs in the provision of health care, welfare, and also the protection of the environment.

The 'letsema' voluntarism campaign has been identified with Thabo Mbeki who is renowned for reviving old and forgotten concepts. Firstly it was the concept of the 'African Renaissance' which, it is believed, was not his coinage.<sup>5</sup> Secondly it was the concept of a 'new cadre'<sup>6</sup> 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 are encouraged to fight and overcome the attitude some people have, namely that they are entitled to receive free goods and services without any effort on their part.<sup>7</sup> 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. It should also be noted that the pronouncement of a voluntarism campaign fits into the broader ANC and government short and long term motives. As a short-term motive, with this campaign Mbeki is trying to rekindle within the citizens a sense of doing things for themselves. An envisaged long-term goal is to give the South African citizens an opportunity to equip themselves with relevant skills in different job situations.<sup>8</sup>

The article intends to unravel misunderstandings and misconceptions about the meaning of voluntarism as pronounced by Mbeki. With job scarcity in South Africa, voluntarism is seen as a way to secure a job in the future if such job

<sup>4</sup> Pretoria News, 9 February 2002.

<sup>5</sup> T Selepe, The content and context of the African Renaissance: A historical survey, **Word and Action**, No. 374, Summer, 2000, pp. 12-3.

<sup>6</sup> The concept of the 'new cadre' was articulated by President Thabo Mbeki during the national general conference of the ANC in 2000. The infightings which existed in the ANC provincial structures in 2000, necessitated Mbeki to pronounce the idea of a 'new cadre' after he had realized that many people were promoting the fights 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. The rift between ANC members from the north and south in the Free State Province is an example of such infightings within the provincial structures of the ANC. This also happened in the ANC-led provinces of the North West and Mpumalanga.

<sup>7</sup> **Sowetan**, 28 October 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Mr TM Selemela, 26 January 2004.

opportunities avail themselves and the campaign has been used as a job hunting springboard. The article further examines the tensions that existed between permanent workers, workers' unions and volunteers in work situations. How the government officials responded in the promotion of this voluntarism campaign is also scrutinized.

## 2. MEANING AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE 'LETSEMA/ILIMA' VOLUNTARISM CAMPAIGN

UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, described voluntarism as follows: "Voluntarism 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."<sup>9</sup> These 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 believed that governments should take the lead in facilitating the work of the volunteers in order to increase the effectiveness of the public services.

Voluntarism means different things to different people. For some people the defining characteristic of voluntarism is the absence of financial reward while for others lack of coercion is the main identifier. Worldwide voluntarism takes on 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 voluntarism that will take into account the variety of contexts in which it operates, it must be noted that voluntarism in South Africa is different from the way other countries understand it. The following is the South African meaning and interpretation of the voluntarism campaign: 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, and 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, community volunteers.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.iyv2001.org/infobase/press/01\\_02\\_27ENG.htm](http://www.iyv2001.org/infobase/press/01_02_27ENG.htm), consulted October 2002.

<sup>10</sup> *Natal Witness*, 5 February 2002.

'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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> There is a dissimilarity between 'letsema' as pronounced by Mbeki and what voluntarism means today. With this campaign Mbeki intended to revive pride among the Africans, in keeping with the theme of looking for African solutions to African problems. Although Mbeki's voluntarism campaign is without monetary attachment to the volunteers, thanksgiving reward in the form of food and African beer is also non-existent and that made his call of 'letsema' to be doubted as it did not adhere to the basis principle of 'letsema' as it had been done in the olden days.<sup>13</sup>

In justifying the importance of this campaign, Mbeki indicated that the ANC has always depended on voluntarism to show that people are their own liberators. This was evident during the 1952 Defiance Campaign when the ANC leaders like Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela offered themselves as volunteers.<sup>14</sup> The ANC has always upheld the views that change can only be achieved by the mass involvement of the people; hence the aim of the 'letsema' voluntarism campaign was to mobilize people to become their own liberators from poverty and underdevelopment.<sup>15</sup> Voluntarism was also a major concept used in the recruitment of members of Umkhonto WeSizwe (MK). Mbeki did not clearly spell out as to which shape the campaign should take. It was not clear whether voluntary organizations would take the lead or individuals were to engage in voluntary activities.

A major criticism levelled against this campaign is accountability. For example, if one volunteers as a police officer, to whom does one account if problems occur and disciplinary measures are expected to be taken? Does a volunteer become subjected to a formal inquiry like full-time employees if there is an act of misconduct involving a volunteer? It is obvious that when Mbeki pronounced this campaign, some of the practicalities of its implementation were not seriously contemplated.

It is clear from the above-mentioned examples that voluntarism entails giving oneself for the greater good. Some critics have also indicated that in most cases voluntarism involves risks of varying degrees. Risks include working for long hours and working night shifts. This was evident at Pelonomi Hospital in

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<sup>11</sup> **The Star**, 18 January 2002.

<sup>12</sup> **Sowetan Sunday World**, 20 January 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Rev. R Ntsimane, 29 July 2004.

<sup>14</sup> **Natal Witness**, 5 February 2002.

<sup>15</sup> <<http://lists.anc.org.za/pipemail/anctoday/2002/000032.html>, consulted December 2003.

Bloemfontein where volunteers were exposed to long working hours.<sup>16</sup> It is in the preparedness to face such risks for the benefit of people other than oneself that voluntarism becomes an invaluable tool in humanity's quest for social progress. While voluntarism is based on 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 they offer, they expect something in return. With the high rate of unemployment in South Africa, it is sometimes difficult for people to volunteer their services without any monetary gain. The above scenario prevails in South Africa.

### 3. DOES VOLUNTARISM FIT IN SOUTH AFRICA'S CURRENT SOCIETY?

Mbeki's call for voluntarism 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, voluntarism is an inexpensive solution to a range of socio-economic problems including unemployment. People would be equipped with relevant skills and experience needed for employment purposes.<sup>17</sup> 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 had been taken at the party's national general council in 2000?<sup>18</sup> If this campaign would be beneficial to South African citizens, why did it take almost two years to be implemented? One may argue that Mbeki did not want to pronounce this campaign as he had just taken over presidency in 1999.

Despite the above-mentioned benefits of voluntarism, without doubt the call for this campaign was likely to meet with public indifference as communities have lost their civic spirit. In the past civic-spirited African communities were characterized by altruistic individuals who formed community organizations through which they dedicated themselves to public causes. In the past individuals volunteered to serve on community committees to tackle social issues like poverty and unemployment. 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 resulted in promoting 'letsema' as it was understood by the Africans.<sup>19</sup> In the current South African society the public spirit has been drained,

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Ms W Ramongalo, 26 January 2003.

<sup>17</sup> **Sowetan**, 21 January 2002.

<sup>18</sup> **City Press**, 6 January 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Mr Z Mthiyane, 11 November 2003.

perhaps due to unemployment crises. This is manifested by the decline of the number of civic structures and also lack of activism. This decline is to a certain extent seen as a betrayal of a long tradition within African communities.

Steven Friedman, Director for the Centre for Policy Studies, is of the opinion that if the ANC 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 South African citizens to enter into a partnership with the government in order to achieve common goals. According to him, Mbeki's call was a good venture, but he doubted whether Mbeki understood the challenges facing the ANC government. He contended that this call was an attempt to divert people's focus from the government's failure to create jobs. Following the ANC's election manifestos for both the 1994 and 1999 general elections, the issue of job creation was a priority. The perception was expressed in the **Business Day** that Mbeki's pronouncement of the 'letsema' voluntarism campaign was viewed as an attempt of the government to shy away from its promises and responsibilities made during the electioneering campaigns.<sup>20</sup> It is also argued that despite the call by Mbeki, the creation of jobs should not be seen as only the government's responsibility. The corporate world should also be involved.

Mbeki clearly understands that a partnership between government and its citizens is necessary if South Africa is to make progress, also concerning the reconstruction and development programme. Therefore, Mbeki's choice of 'letsema' as a volunteering campaign and slogan was politically inspired. For inculcating a spirit of working together amongst South African citizens, this voluntarism campaign is commendable. In his speech Mbeki might have detected the unemployment problem accurately. There is a belief, however, that Mbeki's political cure for this problem by introducing a voluntarism 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.

For the current South African citizens, the idea of voluntarism is a vibrant move, but Mbeki's call for this campaign does not seem to be addressing the problem of unemployment. While the citizens have appreciation for the government's service delivery programmes, criticisms are levelled against it for moving at a snails' pace in creating jobs while people are being urged to volunteer. The choice of the 'letsema' and 'vukuzenzele' campaigns should have been triggered by the feeling that South Africans should be willing to contribute to the voluntarism campaign. A

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<sup>20</sup> **Business Day**, 22 February 2002.

logical question is how one offers himself or herself for the volunteering campaign while suffering the realities of poverty?

For South African citizens, how politicians clothe the language of their presentation counts more than the content of what is presented. In an article published by **City Press** 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."<sup>21</sup> Hlophe admitted that the speech had 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 the latter case, Mbeki must stand out as a statesman so that national patriotism is not confused with ANC patriotism.<sup>22</sup>

Mbeki contends that voluntarism 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 they also make accusations that the ANC-led government is operating against its promises of job creation. The test for the campaign to succeed would be whether Mbeki, ministers and politicians would continue to assist their communities to become volunteers or would it be a one day show of which the volunteering is left to the unemployed people.<sup>23</sup>

One other criticism against this campaign is the fact that it appears as if it is the ANC's brainchild. After the ANC Gauteng Special Provincial General Council had been held on 4<sup>th</sup> August 2002, a declaration was made that the ANC in Gauteng had 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.<sup>24</sup> This provoked other political parties to resist the campaign. The United Democratic Movement (UDM) of Bantu Holomisa openly criticized Mbeki's call. Holomisa argued that the voluntarism campaign would create a false hope among the unemployed people who are desperately seeking a way to be recognized by potential employers.

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<sup>21</sup> **City Press**, 3 February 2002.

<sup>22</sup> **Ibid.**

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Mr PJ Mofokeng, 31 January 2004.

<sup>24</sup> <<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/pr/2002/pr0806b.html>, consulted November 2003.

The fact that this campaign was viewed as politically owned by the ANC created participation problems for other stakeholders, whether they were political parties or non-politically aligned organizations. The former KwaZulu-Natal's 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?"<sup>25</sup> This statement by Ndebele was an indication that the ANC controlled the campaign. It should be noted that, in some cases, the youth responded positively to the voluntarism campaign with a future prospect of employment in mind and not because they were ANC members.

Besides the criticisms by the UDM leader, Pieter Mulder, leader of the Freedom Front Plus (FF+) also condemned this campaign as an attempt to advance the ANC's activities under the pretext of helping the community. He cited the example where for many years schools for black children had been sustained by fund raising campaigns initiated by volunteers; therefore the ANC should not run the show as if this campaign was their initiative.<sup>26</sup> These sentiments were echoed by Cassie Aucamp, leader of the Afrikanereenheidsbeweging. Aucamp stated that under the pretext of building the nation, Mbeki was in fact building a strong ANC through campaigns like 'letsema'.<sup>27</sup>

In most cases the campaign made more sense to elderly people than to the youth. The voices of the aging and the aged expressed a more intellectual understanding of what 'letsema' was all about. In most African schools the 'letsema' campaign is promoted by elderly people rather than by the youth. The youth made this campaign a once off event. MM Mabaso argued that successful school feeding schemes are run by older women, who nurture the next generation, despite their own hardships. The reason behind this may be the fact that the youth is more concerned with job opportunities than with volunteering.<sup>28</sup>

#### **4. PROBLEMS AND SUCCESSES RELATED TO THE 'LETSEMA' VOLUNTARISM CAMPAIGN**

In South Africa today, there are forces impinging voluntarism which are capable of radically changing its traditional characteristics, namely, diversity, freedom, creativity, flexibility, and advocacy, as well as the extent and character of volunteer participation. These forces include what might be called a money crunch, compounded by inflation, changing relationships with the government, the

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<sup>25</sup> **City Press**, 6 January 2002.

<sup>26</sup> **Volksblad**, 31 January 2002.

<sup>27</sup> **Beeld**, 31 January 2002.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Mrs MM Mabaso, 31 January 2004.



changing role and status of volunteers and sometimes lack of public understanding. 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. Although, by contrast, white communities had for a long time embarked on voluntarism campaigns in schools and churches, such campaigns were not in line with the call of 'letsema'.

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.<sup>29</sup> The non-commitment of this group to volunteer sent a message that voluntarism is for a chosen group of people and not for others. Although people cannot be forced to volunteer, this campaign should at least reflect all the racial groups of South Africa in voluntary activities, something that is lacking in the 'letsema' campaign. According to Potgieter, these were the people most vocal about rising crime levels and government's failure to protect them.<sup>30</sup> One may also argue that by offering to help with administration, counselling or even cleaning 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 it differs from this call by Mbeki which 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, the real test that faced Mbeki's 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 Unions (COSATU) could subscribe to this campaign as this was viewed as a threat to the workers themselves.<sup>31</sup>

Lack of an implementation plan was cited as one reason for poor showing of volunteers in 'letsema' activities. The notion of free will by the volunteers is difficult to uphold in South Africa. AK Stenzel and HM Feeney argue that in any volunteering interaction, people's motivation to volunteer usually includes a mix of reasons such as peer pressure and social obligation, but it would draw the line at

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<sup>29</sup> **Pretoria News**, 25 February 2002.

<sup>30</sup> **Ibid.**

<sup>31</sup> **The Herald**, 11 February 2002.

any overt attempt by government to force people to participate.<sup>32</sup> This was evident in some parts of the country when this campaign was first put into action. In August 2002, for example, the youth of Parys (northern Free State) with the help of Umsobomvu Youth Fund painted a school. This just became a one day show, whereas 'letsema' is about a continuation of such an event.

The notion of reward is not clear in Mbeki's voluntarism 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 voluntarism campaign is the issue of an organizational setting. In most cases voluntarism activities in South Africa happen in isolation as there is a lack of volunteer organizations. One may argue that volunteering should be carried out through a formal, non-profit or voluntary organization of some sort. It seems as if Mbeki opted for a more relaxed and informal way of volunteering where individuals or rather organizations could participate. Many of these campaigns happen in group activities which are not an organization or aligned to any organization. In most cases there are no designed volunteer training and development manuals which could be used in orientating the volunteers. Recently Umsobomvu Youth Fund organized training in Johannesburg in counselling, home-based care and HIV/Aids care. This came as a relief to volunteers in the area.<sup>33</sup> It is also not clear as to how volunteers are recruited in South Africa, an issue that makes voluntarism to be difficult to understand.<sup>34</sup>

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 as if 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.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> AK Stenzel and HM Feeney, **Volunteer training and development: a manual** (New York, 1976), pp. 2-15.

<sup>33</sup> **Daily Sun**, 4 August 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Rev. A Lieta, 29 July 2004.

<sup>35</sup> **Ibid.**

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 to all of which a month in 2002 had been allocated.<sup>36</sup> The lack of detail of this plan or how to promote this voluntary campaign created problems for those who wanted to support it. Because of this the workers unions were hesitant to support this venture by Mbeki. Many reasons were advanced by the unionists as to why this campaign would not succeed. In the **Mail and Guardian** 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."<sup>37</sup>

Conflict with workers unions and expectations of jobs and pay derailed the 'letsema' project. The conflict which centres mainly on the false expectation of employment that it had created, led to the fact that in some institutions the campaign was suspended. In most institutions like schools, police stations and hospitals, some union members viewed this campaign as an exploitation of the unemployed. In some cases members felt threatened by these volunteers who usually outsmarted 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 demotivated. In some cases permanent staff members ill-treated the volunteers by making them work long and abnormal shifts and they made the volunteers accountable to them. In defence of the campaign, the government indicated that no one had been forced to volunteer and that the campaign was about people working together and giving of themselves, not about fairness and pay.<sup>38</sup>

Vusi Nhlapo, national president of the National Health and Allied Worker's Union (NEHAWU), slammed the government for not consulting them before Mbeki had launched this campaign. He argued that voluntarism is a labour matter and involves workers; therefore, the unions should have been informed about the pronouncement of the 'letsema' campaign in order for the leadership of the union to motivate members to take part in the campaign.<sup>39</sup> The same sentiments were echoed by the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union (POPCRU), who indicated that this campaign had not been managed correctly and people had been misinformed about

<sup>36</sup> Months for the year 2002 were divided as follows in as far as the volunteering 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.

<sup>37</sup> **Mail and Guardian**, 17-24 January 2002.

<sup>38</sup> **Sunday Times**, 20 October 2002.

<sup>39</sup> **Ibid.**

the possibility of getting employment.<sup>40</sup> 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."<sup>41</sup> It is surprising that NEHAWU and POPCRU questioned the implementation of the campaign because both unions are COSATU affiliates. COSATU being in alliance with the ANC, it was logical for its affiliates to embrace the campaign with ease.

Workers unions were not speaking with one voice. Contrary to the above-mentioned 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 voluntarism. In East London, for example, SAPU members with the help of volunteers from the Community Policing Forum (CPF) offered to work overtime without pay. These police officers patrolled Duncan Village and managed to crack down on criminals in the neighbourhood during the night.<sup>42</sup> For these members, the voluntarism meant taking the lead in voluntarism campaign rather than expecting the unemployed to volunteer.

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. In September 2002, two hospitals in KwaZulu-Natal had to deal with volunteers demanding meals, uniforms and even stipend for working and travelling. 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.<sup>43</sup>

Unlike other countries, voluntarism 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, there should be some skills development. For example, it is envisaged that when a volunteer works with AIDS orphans he or she should develop basic nursing skills; while volunteering at a community radio station basic media skills are required.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> **Ibid.**

<sup>41</sup> <<http://www.suntimes.co.za/2002/10/20/news/news33.asp>, consulted November 2002.

<sup>42</sup> **Daily Dispatch**, 16 March 2002.

<sup>43</sup> **Sunday Times**, 20 October 2002.

<sup>44</sup> **City Press**, 12 January 2003; **The Citizen**, 28 August 2001.

To volunteer may be an act performed without receiving payment, but in a developing country like South Africa one cannot ignore the harsh reality that the majority of South Africans are barely able to make ends meet and daily routines are prioritized by a constant battle to 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, voluntarism is not free. Mobilizing volunteers is hard work and costs money. Therefore, volunteer programs need paid coordinators. N Naidoo, Secretary General and Chief Executive Officer 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 following requirements for a volunteering program:

- 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.
- Ensuring volunteer back-ups to cover natural interruptions in volunteering which are characteristic of seniors' lives.
- Establishing 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.<sup>45</sup>

Although voluntarism came under criticism from some quarters, the ANC and Mbeki believed that the practice was the only way to ensure that communities participate in their own development and would not be overly reliant on government initiatives. To some people, this campaign was a good idea.

Xolela Mangcu, Director of the Steve Biko Foundation, in his article entitled "Mbeki talked the talk now he must walk the walk", that was published by the **Sunday Independent**, commends 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 the voluntarism campaign. Showing his joy and acceptance of the campaign he indicates 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.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> <<http://www.worldwidevolunteer.org/en/library/documents>, consulted December 2003.

<sup>46</sup> **Sunday Independent**, 10 February 2002.

Although there are numerous criticisms levelled against the voluntarism campaign in general and the 'letsema' campaign by Mbeki in particular, there are some benefits in volunteering. Voluntarism basically constitutes opportunities for sensitizing the government and the community to 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 common cause. When and how volunteers are recruited contribute to how effective they are on issues and how long they will continue volunteering.

For voluntarism to succeed and to ensure the maintenance of volunteers in South Africa, training and orientation are important tools for retaining them. 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.<sup>47</sup> Awareness should be created within the community which does not place enough value on volunteers.

## 5. CONCLUSION

It is clear from the above arguments that Mbeki's call on voluntarism was not aimed at solving the unemployment problem in South Africa. Although this campaign was heeded by many people, it was evident that people volunteered on the basis of being considered when job opportunities would become 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 was in most cases not friendly. These unfriendly relationships compromised the motives for the implementation of the campaign. In some cases, instead of equipping people with the relevant skills of work in institutions like hospitals, volunteers are given only the most menial tasks of typing, answering the phone, carrying trays regardless of the volunteer's background, education, or experience. This in itself compromised Mbeki's motives about the voluntarism campaign. The article shows that voluntarism can be a threat to full employment in South Africa if it is not properly administered. In South Africa there should be an understanding that the volunteer worker supplements, supports, and enriches the work of the professional and never replaces a potential paid staff member. It is regrettable that some organizations and unions view volunteers as a threat to the careers of the permanent staff members.

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<sup>47</sup> K Richards, **Training volunteer organisers** (London, 1977), pp. 1-64. See also a report by N Carter, **Volunteers: The untapped potential** (Ottawa, 1975), pp. 43-97.

Although it is not easy to quantify how many projects flowed from this campaign, it should be noted that the voluntarism campaign is a continuous process. It was welcomed with enthusiasm after its pronouncement and to a certain extent there were benefits to people being volunteers. In Mangaung police station, for example, volunteers were considered when job opportunities became available towards the end of 2002. This is an indication that despite all the criticisms levelled against the voluntarism campaign in South Africa and the government's ineffectiveness in creating jobs, the campaign did not remain in the domain of political rhetoric. Despite all the problems attached to this campaign, communities are organizing themselves in groups to help people who are living with HIV/Aids. Groups like Lesego La Batho (Gift of the People), Trauma, HIV/Aids and Elderly Care Centres, Ikageng-Itereleng Aids Centre, Lesedi La Sechaba (Light of the Nation) are organizations mainly run by the volunteers.