

The Philosophical Backbone of SEF

Work as a Human Capability in a Structurally Damaged Labour Market

South Africa's unemployment crisis is usually described in economic terms: too few jobs, too little growth, too many young people entering a labour market that cannot absorb them. All of this is true, but it is not the whole truth. Unemployment is not only an economic condition; it is a psychological, social, and existential one. It reshapes how people see themselves, how they organise their days, and how they imagine their futures.

This is not an abstract claim. It is grounded in lived experience — including the experience of young people in Worcester, where one of the most insightful studies on unemployment and identity was conducted. Rachel Willemse's 2015 thesis, based on interviews with unemployed youth in Worcester, shows with quiet clarity what unemployment does to a person: days lose their structure, confidence erodes, social life contracts, and identity becomes uncertain. Even small tasks — helping at home, volunteering, doing odd jobs — were described as stabilising because they restored a sense of usefulness and belonging.

For those who grew up in Worcester, this is not surprising. The drift of unemployment is something you see, feel, and recognise long before you can name it. SEF's philosophy begins there: with the lived reality of what it means to have nothing meaningful to do.

1. Work as Structure

Unemployment dissolves routine. Without anchors in the day, time becomes undifferentiated and heavy. People struggle to wake with purpose, to maintain momentum, or to imagine tomorrow as different from today.

SEF treats **structure itself as a developmental good**. The programme is built around predictable rhythms: regular workdays, clear start and end times, weekly cycles of activity and reflection. This is not administrative convenience; it is psychological scaffolding. Structure restores agency. It gives people a way to move through time with intention.

2. Work as Identity

Willemse's participants described unemployment as a collapse of identity: "I am nothing", "I am not an adult yet", "I don't feel like

myself". Without a recognised role, people struggle to locate themselves in the social world.

SEF responds by giving participants **socially legible roles**: care workers, food system workers, environmental stewards, learning supporters. These are not symbolic titles; they are real contributions to real systems. They allow participants to answer, without hesitation, the question: *What do you do?*

Identity is not built through introspection. It is built through participation.

3. Work as Belonging

Unemployment isolates. Shame and comparison lead people to withdraw from friends, community spaces, and public life. The absence of work becomes the absence of social connection.

SEF is designed as **social infrastructure**. Teams work together. Tasks are collective. Reflection spaces and check-ins are built into the weekly rhythm. Belonging is produced through shared effort, mutual visibility, and the simple fact that people are missed when they are not there.

Work is not only something you do; it is a place where you are held.

4. Work as Purpose and Meaning

Participants in the Worcester study described even small tasks as stabilising because they made them feel useful. Purpose is not a luxury; it is a psychological necessity.

SEF chooses tasks for their **intrinsic social meaning**: feeding children, restoring land, supporting learning, strengthening local systems. These tasks matter to someone's life, to a landscape, or to a community. Meaning is not an accidental by-product of the programme; it is a design criterion.

People do not need glamorous work. They need meaningful work.

5. Work as Capability

Amartya Sen's capability framework helps articulate what Willemsen's participants described: unemployment contracts people's sense of what is possible; work expands it. Work increases agency, confidence, and future orientation. It allows people to act in the world and see effects.

SEF is not a narrow "pathway to jobs". It is a **capability platform** — a place where people stabilise, practice agency, and build the functionings

that make future choices possible. Income matters, but so do rhythm, confidence, recognition, and the experience of being able to contribute.

6. Public Employment as Psychological Intervention

The emotional landscape of unemployment — shame, anxiety, hopelessness — is not incidental. It is central. Public employment programmes that focus only on wages and outputs miss the deeper truth: **work heals.**

SEF treats public employment as a psychological intervention in a structurally damaged labour market. It interrupts drift, restores self-respect, and rebuilds a sense of trajectory. It gives people a place to stand.

7. From Worcester to a National Model

The insight that work matters beyond income is not theoretical for SEF. It is rooted in the lived experience of young people in Worcester — and in the life of SEF's own leadership. The programme is, in part, an institutional answer to a question first felt in a small town: *What does it do to a person when there is nothing meaningful to do?*

SEF's philosophical backbone is therefore simple, grounded, and empirically supported:

Work is a human capability. Work is a source of dignity. Work is a form of belonging. Work is a stabilising rhythm. Work is a platform for development.

In a country where millions of people are denied the opportunity to contribute, SEF insists on a different starting point: **people do not need to be rescued; they need to be included.**